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SPARROWS ON WHEELS

by

HEIDI L. JANZ ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 1995

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ISBN 0-612-06351-8

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Sparrows on Wheels* submitted by Heidi L. Janz in partial fulfullment of the requirementsf for the degree of Master of Arts.

Juliet McMaster

J. S. McMaster (Supervisor)

G. Hollingshead

AE Altmann

A. Altmann

September 11, 1995

For Henry and in loving memory of Molly. All kids should grow up with friends like you and then get to keep them for a lifetime.

ABSTRACT

I will begin my description of this novel by stating what it is **not**. It is **not** a sentimental sob-story about how hard it is growing up with a disability. It is **not** a manifesto against integration, **nor** is it a glorification of the kind of "special" school that kids with disabilities used to attend. What this novel **is**, or at least what it is intended to be, is an honest look at life inside a "special" school through the eyes of Tallia Taves, an aspiring writer with Cerebral Palsy.

This novel follows Tallia and her classmates through their junior high and high school years at Inglewood School Hospital. Increasing integration and frequent deaths among students with Muscular Dystrophy cause Inglewood's population to dwindle. Resentful of continually having to say goodbye, Tallia fiercely opposes the unrelenting drive towards change which threatens to rob her of her friends.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As is the case with most of my accomplishments in life, from earning my B.A. to getting up in the morning, this thesis/novel could never have been completed were it not for a number of people who have provided me with various forms of essential support. Although they deserve much more in return for their efforts than a few measly lines of acknowledgement at the front of a book that may never see the outside of the English Department library, this is the best I can do for now. Of course, if someday this book is discovered by a big-time producer, and the royalty cheques come pouring in, the people mentioned below will naturally receive **COPIES**.

And so, I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for helping to make this book possible:

Dr. Juliet McMaster, for not only believing in me and believing in the project enough to agree to supervise this thesis, but also being willing to continue with the book as an underground thesis, should I have been forced to drop out of the M.A. program in order to prove to Ralph Klein & Co. that I *really am* disabled.

Prof. Greg Hollingshead, for making this an internationally-read work even before its completion, and for going above and beyond the call of duty for most second-readers in spending the better part of his year's leave rooting out my unwieldy tags.

Catherine Nelson-McDermott, for dismembering my "baby" when I didn't have the heart to.

Tamara Batke, Lianne Fookes, and Mary Marshall-Durrell for taking over as my typing hands when I was too pooped to pound the keys.

Henry Unrau, for reading endless "crip and sick kids" novels onto tape so that I could figure out how **not** to write this book; for keeping track of disappearing and reappearing typewriters throughout the book, and also for keeping me somewhat sane through the insanity of thesis-writing.

The rest of my Glenrose family, for being a constant source of support and inspiration.

My parents and family for providing me with the physical support that enabled me to write this book.

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CHAPTER ONE - MOVIN' RIGHT ALONG

Outside Tallia's bedroom window, sparrows chirped their greetings to the rising September sun. At the sound of her mother clattering dishes about in the kitchen, her eyes sprang open as the fog of her semiconscious mind was suddenly pierced by the realization that this was, in fact, **THE DAY**. Anxiously, she peered between the rails of her hospital bed and struggled to focus her eyes on the clock-radio that sat on the dresser beside the bed. "Six-fifteen," she groaned to herself. "I've only been asleep for four hours!" With great effort, she partially shifted the weight of her body off her left side so that she could liberate her arm from beneath the heavy down quilt. Well, there wasn't much point in trying to go back to sleep for an hour - it had taken her four times that long to fall asleep in the first place. A sudden cramp in her abdomen clinched the decision - ready or not, she would have to start this day.

Up, shakily, went the right arm and down went the talk button on the wireless intercom that lay beside her pillow. It took several seconds for the tongue, which was partially paralysed by cerebral palsy, to form an intelligible word. "M-Mom -- Mom."

"Tallia, do you need to be turned again?" came the inquiry from the other end of the intercom.

"No, I wanna get up."

"But you still have an hour yet."

"I know, but I've gotta go to the bathroom."

"Okay, I'll be right there."

It must be an undocumented symptom of cerebral palsy, Tallia mused as another painful cramp spread from her bowels up through the rest of her body, while the brain is being deprived of oxygen during birth the part that controls bowel movements is somehow set to activate at the most inconvenient time possible.

Presently, Tallia heard the rattle of her commode being pushed down the hallway from the bathroom. Relief was on its way. Another few seconds and the bedroom door opened, and her mother entered pushing the commode. "Do you have to go right away, or can I give you your bed-bath and get you dressed first?" Anna Taves asked her daughter.

It was tempting fate, but Tallia opted for the bed-bath - just to show that body of hers who was boss.

At that, Anna scurried from the room and returned shortly with basin, soap and towels in hand. Now began the process of stripping the pyjamas off of the uncooperative spastic limbs, getting the body that seemed ever-shaking (partly from spasms, partly from cold) onto the middle of the towel, and starting to sponge it down. They talked as this procedure continued.

"You certainly had a restless night last night - I must have turned you at least seven times," Anna remarked as she began sponging down Tallia's upper body.

"Yeah, I know," Tallia sighed. "I just couldn't sleep."

"First day jitters?"

"Guess so."

"But you're an old hand at this," Anna reasoned, "You've been going to Inglewood since nursery school."

"Yeah, but I'm going to be in junior high now. I'll be involved in lots more stuff -- there's the Students' Union, noon-hour sports, the yearbook, planning for the year end camp...Maybe I'll even get onto the school paper."

"Don't you think you'll be busy enough with just your classes?"

"But I've gotta try out for the paper if I'm ever gonna get any experience writing."

"Well, you certainly seem to be serious about this writing business." Anna deftly wrung out and resoaped the towel. "You've been cooped up in the house writing all summer. It was all I could do to get you to go outside once in a while. Just look at how pale you still are!"

"I wheeled over to Connie's a few times," countered Tallia. "Besides, the only way to get good at writing is to write - that's what Mr. Harris says."

Any further debate about the role of writing in Tallia's future was preempted by another painful cramp in her abdomen. "Mom, could you get me dressed and to the bathroom fast - I *really* gotta go."

Anna promptly responded to her daughter's distress by getting her half-dressed, onto the commode, and into the bathroom in record time. Half an hour later, she wheeled a very exhausted but greatly relieved Tallia back into the bedroom to complete the process of getting dressed. The constantly spasming arms were gently but firmly guided through bra straps, camisole straps, and blouse sleeves; the sprawling feet were carefully stuffed into nylons and ankle braces. Finally, Anna hoisted Tallia onto her feet so that she could pull up her panties and nylons, and pull down the pink and grey pleated skirt that had been specially purchased for this occasion on the great "Welcome to Life as a Teenager" shopping excursion that Connie had taken Tallia on three weeks ago. Having been lowered back safely onto the commode, Tallia examined herself in her dresser mirror. "Hmm... not half bad. Guess Connie was right - she said the colour suited me."

"It does," Anna agreed. "But why is it that you hardly ever pay attention to me when I say that something suits you?"

"Ah, Mom, your taste is warped." Tallia rolled her eyes. "You're *old*!"

"Connie Malone is only four years younger than I am." Anna was indignant.

Here was a challenge for Tallia - how to explain to her mother in ten words or less what made Connie a real, honest-to-goodness, "with-it" pal instead of just a stodgy old grown-up who worked as the Library Technician at Inglewood. "Yeah, but Connie's -- *cool.*"

Anna looked at her daughter with an expression of bemusement. "Cool?" she repeated questioningly.

"Yeah, Connie's cool - she knows a lot--I can talk to her about stuff and ask her about stuff without feeling dumb or anything--she's ... cool," explained Tallia.

"Not like your warped old mom," Anna rejoined in her best martyr's voice.

Tallia's eyes rolled heavenward. "Moms aren't *supposed* to be cool - they're *moms.*"

Anna broke into half a smile. "So, for a *mom*, I'm okay?"

"Long as you don't start trying to make me wear those goofy old jumpers from last year - you're fine," said Tallia.

"But you looked **SO CUTE** in those jumpers," maintained Anna.

"I'm a teenager now. Teenagers aren't *supposed* to look cute. They're supposed to look --"

"Yeah, yeah, I know - *COOL*," Anna sighed. "So how do *cool* people want their hair done?"

"French braid, please," replied Tallia.

Anna immediately picked up the comb from the dresser and went to work, briskly running the comb through Tallia's thick, long, permed black hair. The task was made considerably more difficult than it would normally have been by the fact that Tallia would suddenly jerk her head involuntarily every time the comb hit a snag. "Tallia, if you want me to do this right, you have to hold still."

"I MIGHT be able to, if you'd stop pulling my hair out by its roots." As Anna carefully continued combing Tallia's hair, the grandfather clock in the living-room struck seven. "It's already seven!" Tallia gasped. "What time did they say Handi-Van is coming again?"

"Between seven-forty-five and eight-fifteen," Anna replied with a sigh. "I really don't know why you couldn't have just stayed with taking the school bus for a few more years - at least we always knew just when it was coming."

A sudden wave of panic struck Tallia as she was reminded of the new mechanics involved in getting to school. "Did Pop remember to bring my electric wheelchair in from the porch before he went to work?" she asked anxiously.

"Not to worry, it's sitting in the living room," Anna calmly reassured her daughter. "I can transfer you right into it, if you like, and you can eat in the lliving room"

"Yeah, that'd be good."

Tallia's hair was finally done. After giving Tallia her glasses, Anna took a step back to admire her work in the mirror. "Well, what do you think? *Cool* enough for you?" she asked with a smug chuckle.

"Yeah, it's *very cool,*" Tallia answered, returning the chuckle. "You did a good job - thanks."

Anna pushed Tallia on the commode into the living room, where, with her customary confidence and deliberateness, she transferred Tallia from her manual wheelchair into her electric wheelchair. Once strapped into the custom-made seat that was specially designed to support her badly-curved back, Tallia flicked the switch on the control box, put her left hand on the joystick and carefully drove across the room, parking diagonally in front of a large sofa. "What do you want for breakfast?" Anna asked as she made her way to the kitchen.

"Just a little cereal and a glass of milk, please."

"Are you sure that's all you want?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling kinda queasy." Tallia glanced at the large grandfather clock that stood in the corner opposite her and saw that it was seven-fifteen. "Mom, shouldn't you go wake up Travis? He's never gonna make it to his eight-thirty class."

"You're right," Anna sighed, hurrying from the kitchen. "I honestly don't know what that boy's gonna do if he ever has to get himself up in the morning." She walked briskly down the hall and flicked on the light in Travis's bedroom.

"Mom, what's the idea!" the nineteen-year-old groaned, burying his head in the pillow.

"Time to get up, Travis," announced Anna.

"Five more minutes," yawned Travis, rolling over.

"'Fraid not, son," Anna sighed, pulling the covers off the bed. "You don't wanna be late for the first class of the semester."

"Mom!" Travis whined in annoyance as the sudden rush of cold air pried his eyes open.

"You awake now?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm awake," Travis moaned sulkily.

"Good. Now, I've got to feed your sister her breakfast. You get up, have your shower, and get dressed. You haven't much time."

Anna returned to the living room to find Tallia waiting for her rather impatiently. "Mom, Handi-Van might be here in twenty minutes. And I've still gotta eat, put my earrings in, and put some perfume on."

"Don't worry," Anna said calmly. "I've got your breakfast all ready to go."

Anna was just feeding Tallia her last mouthful of cereal when Travis entered the living room, knapsack and jacket in hand. "Well, what do ya know - it walks!" crowed Tallia.

"Better than you drive!" retorted Travis. "So what are you gonna do on your first day of junior high, Miss Teenybopper? Hang out in the library and read *Teenybopper Beat*?"

"It's *Tiger Beat*, Mr. Smart-Guy," Tallia rejoined haughtily. "And why shouldn't I spend some of my day reading? - all you do in your classes at university is sit there looking at pictures!"

"Charts and graphs!" objected Travis. "Business students don't **look at pictures**, they *read* charts and graphs. They can also do math, unlike *some people*."

"Math is for people with no creativity in their souls!" declared Tallia. "At least *I* can use multi-syllabic words!"

"So can I, **TEE-NI-BOP-PER**!" taunted Travis.

"Okay, you two, time out," interjected Anna. "Travis, you'd better get a move on if you're gonna eat breakfast."

"No time for breakfast anyway," said Travis. "Just wanted to find my keys."

"But you've got to have breakfast--" Anna objected plaintively.

"I'll grab something on campus," Travis said hurriedly. "Keys?"

"China cabinet, glass dish," sighed Anna.

"Right where you chucked 'em last night," crowed Tallia. "Bet ya I won't be so disorganized when I'm in university!"

"You in university?!" Travis chortled. "That's a good one!"

Tallia's dark eyes flashed. "Just you wait!--"

"Can't--sorry, gotta go!" Travis grinned, tossing his keys in the air and catching them. "See ya, Bozo--Bye, Mom." And before Tallia's partially paralysed tongue could form one syllable of a rebuttal, Travis was out the front door.

"Jerk!" Tallia burst out in exasperation. "He doesn't believe I'm going to make it to university!"

"You're not going to make it to Grade Seven if we don't get a move on," Anna declared matter-of-factly, wiping the residue of milk off Tallia's mouth. "Which earrings do you want?"

"Silver hoops, please," said Tallia, grudgingly abandoning the subject of what a great injustice Travis had done her.

In a matter of minutes, the earrings were selected and put in, the perfume was brought from the bedroom and dabbed on, the book-bag was placed in the carrier basket behind the wheelchair, the new lightweight fall jacket was on, and the grey leather purse was stuffed beside her in the wheelchair. No sooner had this series of procedures been completed when a large orange and brown van pulled up in front of the house. For an instant, Tallia wondered why she was taking such pride in going to school in something that looked like it had just been in a head-on collision with the A&W Root Bear. But this and any other self-mocking thought was quickly bulldozed from her mind by the realization that she was only seconds away from making her debut as a full-fledged teenaged junior high student. "There's the van! I'm gone--get the door, will ya, Mom."

"All right, all right, just let me make sure your purse is in there right so it won't fall out." Anna wriggled the purse back and forth as if performing a crash-test. "There now - it should stay put. Have you got your bus ticket?"

"Right where you put it two seconds ago, in my right hand." Tallia's usually sluggish speech became brisk, betraying a tinge of impatience with Anna's last-minute mother-hen routine.

"Okay, then, I guess you're set," Anna announced with what almost sounded like a reluctant sigh before preceding Tallia through the hallway and porch to the front door.

Tallia followed close behind her mother, concentrating intently on her driving so as not to add to the numerous scrapes and dents which decorated the lower portion of the walls leading to the front door. "Bye, Mom, see you tonight," she said quickly, driving by her mother who held open the door.

"Have a good day, dear."

The 8 a.m. September sun was so bright that it hurt Tallia's eyes as she drove down the ramp leading from her front door to the sidewalk. Squinting, she could just make out a shortish female figure opening the side doors of the van. By the time Tallia reached the front gate, the driver had already unfolded and lowered the hydraulic wheelchair lift onto the sidewalk.

Once lifted up to the level of the van door, Tallia backed into the van and parked herself squarely behind the driver's seat. The young woman driver climbed in after her and fastened her wheelchair to the floor with nylon seatbelt straps. Then she folded up the lift, shut the doors and scurried back into her seat. Tallia held out a shaky hand over the driver's shoulder. "Here's your ticket," she smiled, satisfied at the grown-upness of the act.

"Thanks," she smiled back, taking the ticket with one hand and picking up her run-sheet from the dashboard with the other. Mechanically, she pocketed the ticket and took out a pen, writing something on the sheet as she studied it. "You're going to Inglewood School Hospital, right?"

"Yeah - the bus entrance."

The driver slid the run-sheet back on the dashboard and shifted the van into gear. "We're off," she smiled at Tallia in the rear-view mirror.

The van pulled out into the street and they were indeed off. The driver, although quite friendly, didn't seem overly eager to strike up any lengthy conversation, which was actually just fine with Tallia since the noise of moving traffic always made it very difficult for her to make her impaired speech understood. Thus left to her own thoughts, Tallia's mind turned to her destination as it must have been printed on the run-sheet - Inglewood School Hospital ... *Inglewood School Hospital - What a schizophrenic name!* she thought, *How can some place be a school and a hospital at the same time?!* Yet, in some kind of weird way, that's what it was ... and maybe it *was* a little schizophrenic. There were teachers, nurses, doctors, therapists of all kinds, Occupational, Physio, Speech, and, of course, two hundred students with various disabilities, all in one building. The students weren't really *sick* like patients in a hospital (at least not most of the time), and yet, their disabilities often made it very difficult or even impossible for them to do things that able-bodied students do automatically every day. Many Inglewood students needed help with everything from writing, to eating, to going to the bathroom. Tallia knew that, in many ways, she was much luckier than many of her schoolmates--she had enough control in her hands so that she was able to type with one finger on an electric typewriter that had a metal plate over the keyboard with a hole in it for every key to help her hit one key at a time; her speech *was* often rather difficult for people to understand, but there were students at Inglewood who couldn't speak at all and used word-boards and symbol-boards to communicate; she also had a knack for school and studying that a lot of Inglewood students just didn't seem to have. Her best friend since grade one, Jo-Anne Hanson, said that it was because Tallia was a *keener* and always hung around with *staff*, like Connie and Mr. Harris, the Vice-Principal. Palling around with Connie was one thing--She was "only" support staff (though everybody knew she worked harder than anybody in the whole school and could probably run the place if she had to), and lots of students liked to hang out in the library with her and Mr. Vanders, the wacky librarian. But hanging out with the *Vice-Principal*?! - that was definitely geeky, and maybe even downright weird! It sometimes bothered Tallia when Jo-Anne teased her about being chummy with the Vice-Principal. A few times, when Tallia had gotten fed up with the ribbing and told Jo-Anne to back off, Jo-Anne had tried to laugh it off and say she was just kidding around and couldn't Tallia take a joke, but Tallia still sensed that Jo-Anne really thought it was very weird for a student to talk and kid around with the Vice-Principal the way she did with Mr. Harris.

Looking back, Tallia found it hard to remember exactly how or when she got to know Mr. Harris. He had been around ever since she started school at Inglewood, but it was just two years ago that Tallia really got to know him. It was the day she and Jo-Anne had gotten stuck in the elevator, and Mr. Harris sat outside for two hours and talked to them until the repair crew came. Tallia chuckled silently at her reflection in the bus window as she remembered the day; Jo-Anne was too freaked out to say much of anything, and Mr. Harris just kept going through his very *stale* repertoire of knock-knock jokes, until Tallia finally piped up and told him that he *desperately* needed a new writer. For just a moment, there had been this bemused silence, then Mr. Harris asked her who he could get. Never at a loss for words, Tallia immediately responded, "Yeah, me!" That was the first time she had ever told anyone that she wanted to write. After that, whenever Mr. Harris ran into Tallia in the hallway--or, more accurately, when she ran into him --he would stop and chat. Tallia soon discovered that she and Mr. Harris shared two keen interests - a love for writing and a great appreciation for the comic genius of "The Muppet Show." In Tallia's view, any adult who would admit to having ignored high-school trigonometry in favour of reading and attempting to write murder mysteries, and who would further admit to a genuine affinity with Kermit the Frog and Fozzie Bear, was definitely worthy of hanging out with - Vice-Principal or not!

"The bus entrance is round the other side, right?" The driver's voice summoned Tallia's mind back from its wanderings.

Through the driver's window, Tallia could see that they were approaching the row of large spruce trees which grew along the east side of Inglewood, softening the rigid angles of the grey three-storey rectangular building. "Yeah, you have to go all the way around to the other side," she directed.

Well, this was it - Tallia was now only moments away from making her official debut as a full-fledged teenaged junior high student. A sudden surge of adrenaline pulsed through her body, causing her arms and legs to go into spasm. Very sternly but silently, Tallia commanded her unruly limbs to settle down lest they delay her planned grand entrance. The van slowly pulled into the yet empty bus garage, and soon Tallia found herself sitting in front of the large automatic glass doors leading into the reception area. Upon driving in and seeing the long row of electric wheelchairs lined up neatly between the two stone pillars waiting for their owners to arrive on the school busses, Tallia smiled with satisfaction as she realized that she would no longer have to wait her turn to be transferred from her manual wheelchair into her electric. This would give her loads more time to sit up in the library and gab with Connie before class started - a prospect which pleased her greatly.

"Hey, Tallia, you're certainly getting an early start on the school year," came the pleasant greeting from a medium-height, black-haired woman. She was dressed in a purple pant-suit that made her look utterly civilian except for the white and gold R.N.'s name plate she wore on her blazer.

"Such are the luxuries of being a transportationally independent woman!" Tallia declared proudly.

"I see!" the nurse responded with a laugh. "Come on, I'll give you a hand with your coat."

"Gee, Dorothy, are you sure that's *legal*?!" Tallia questioned in a tone of hyperbolic apprehension. "I'm not one of your elementary kids anymore."

Dorothy Baxter smiled and rolled her eyes as she unfastened Tallia's seatbelt and unzipped her jacket, "Well, Miss Teenaged Junior-Higher, you're not the only one around here who's moved on to bigger and better things!"

"Huh?" Tallia looked up at Dorothy quizzically as she leaned forward so that Dorothy could pull the jacket out from behind her back.

"You, fortunate individual that you are, are speaking to the new Junior-Senior High girls' nurse!" Dorothy announced with a grin.

"Really? Cool! I was kind of worried about having to break somebody else in."

"Well, no worries," Dorothy chuckled as she refastened Tallia's seatbelt. "I'm already plenty broken!"

Dorothy briefly disappeared into the adjacent girls' cloak room to hang up the jacket and then reemerged to help Tallia adjust her skirt. "Any sign of Jo-Anne or the guys yet?" asked Tallia.

"Not yet," Dorothy smiled. "Guess they must not be quite transportationally independent yet!"

"You're just *so cute*!" sneered Tallia.

"Well, I *do try*!" retorted Dorothy.

"Hey, when Jo comes in, could you please tell her I'm in the library?"

"Sure thing," said Dorothy. "See you at recess."

Tallia sped through the reception area, past the administration office, and on to the big double elevators. Whizzing into the open elevator, Tallia effortlessly punched the "2" button which was strategically located at arm-level. She emerged on the second floor and found everything in a state of quiet expectation. The hallways had a curiously antiseptic smell to them, as though the sterility of the hospital had to be overcome anew by the vibrant life of the school. Tallia's wheels glided almost silently along the freshly waxed floor. As she sped down the long broad hallway looking down at the line of fluorescent lights reflected on the floor, Tallia recalled the distant days when she would scamper down this hallway on her old four-wheeled "spider-walker," making a game out of trying to outrun the line of lights shimmering on the floor before her. Though she was now far beyond such childish pursuits, she couldn't resist measuring the speed of her electric wheelchair, the most cherished of all her earthly possessions, by the rate at which it streaked through the line of lights on the floor. As she approached the end of the hallway, she could see the large blue library door standing wide open to display proudly its life-sized poster of a half-toothless Snoopy carrying a hockey stick and pointing to a caption that read: **HAPPINESS IS BEING A GOOD SPORT - AND GOING TO THE LIBRARY**.

The Inglewood library was, to put it simply, the very opposite of what most libraries strive to be. Rather than being a drab, cold room filled only with shelves of rigidly-stacked books and signs forbidding any verbal communication not in whispers, the Inglewood library had walls plastered with Peanuts and Muppets posters, bright green smiley-face cushions strewn here and there on the carpeted floor, and was more often used as a place to chat or read highly comical bits of Dr. Suess aloud than a place to sit in solitude and study. For Tallia, the library had long been the warmest, most commodious room in the entire school. And the woman who was largely responsible for making it that way now pleasantly greeted Tallia from her seat behind the circulation desk to the left of the door.

"Morning, Tallia. Survived your maiden voyage on Handi-Van I see." Tallia's cool friend Connie, thin and grey-haired, was dressed stylishly in a purple skirt suit.

"Piece of cake!" Tallia declared, parking in front of the desk and switching off her chair. She straightened her skirt and sat erect in her chair. "Well, what do you think, Connie?" she asked nervously. "Does it look as good as it did in the store?"

For a moment, Connie cocked her head in deep critical thought as she examined Tallia from to top to toe. "Better," she declared decisively. "Definitely, better! You look *marvellous!*"

"Thanks," grinned Tallia.

"You seem a little tired," said Connie. "Were you up late writing?"

"Not really. I wanted to finish that last short story about that mute girl who gets all wrapped up in that soap opera - but I ended up being finished by ten last night. I just didn't sleep very well," Tallia explained.

"Yeah, those first day jitters are a real pain," Connie commiserated. "Used to drive me nuts - especially in junior high!"

"You used to get them too?" Tallia asked in a tone of delighted surprise.

"Oh yeah - I think everybody does," Connie replied. "That's why teachers don't bother giving out *real* work until the second or third day."

"Makes sense," nodded Tallia.

"So did you bring the story in for me to read?" asked Connie.

"Don't I always?" Tallia responded with a grin. "It's in my bag."

Connie crossed round to the front of the desk where Tallia was sitting, and opened her school bag, taking out a large blue folder. She stood beside Tallia and opened the folder. "Bursting Bubbles," Connie read the title aloud. "I like it."

Just then two men entered the library. "Oh-oh, Tony, it looks like we've stumbled in on an impromptu reading."

"A Tallia Taves masterpiece in the making, no doubt!" Tony Harris declared.

"Yeah, right, Mr. Harris, I probably wouldn't know a masterpiece if it jumped up and bit me!" scoffed Tallia.

"Now, I wouldn't be too sure about that," countered Tony. "It's not every Grade Six student who wins an honourable mention in a school literary contest that's usually only entered by junior and senior high students!"

"Yeah, but--" Tallia faltered.

"I wouldn't put up too much of an argument if I were you, Tallia," the tall man warned her with a grin. "He's the Vice-Principal, he's always right, it's in his contract!"

"And he's got Kermit the Librarian for a Yes-Man!" Tallia countered with a giggle.

"Hi-ho, Kermit-the-Librarian here, that's me!" Kerwin Vanders responded with his best Jim Henson impression. "So what did everyone think of my namesake's debut as a movie star?"

Tony's blue-grey eyes twinkled as he laughed. "Well, he can definitely sing better than you can!"

"Wait a minute!" Tallia interjected in a tone of shock. "You actually *went* to see the Muppet Movie?!"

"Sure I did," Tony replied. "I wouldn't have missed the debut of such a great film classic!"

"Did you take your son?" inquired Tallia.

"Nah, Jim is eighteen now - he's too old for that `kid stuff`!" sighed Tony.

"So you went *by yourself*!" gasped Tallia.

"Well, Shirley wasn't all that keen on taking her husband to go see Kermit the Frog - so yeah, I went by myself!" Tony replied.

Tallia shook her head. "You actually went to the Muppet Movie by yourself - I don't believe it!"

"Why the big shock? You and Connie went, didn't you?"

"Yeah, we had a good time too," Connie interjected.

Tallia smiled slyly at Connie. "Yeah, we did have a good time - only Connie was so embarrassed about being the only person in the theatre over fifteen that she kept pretending that I was her kid!"

"Oh, I did not," protested Connie.

"No?" Tallia challenged smugly. "Then why did you feel the sudden need to start calling me DEAR?!"

"Well--I was just--being affectionate!" faltered Connie.

"Sure you were!" Tallia laughed.

"Well, not to change the subject or anything, but I'd like to hear more about this impromptu reading we've stumbled in on," announced Tony. "Is this part of the series of short stories that you were going to work on over the summer?"

"Yeah, actually, it's the last one I finished," Tallia explained. "I wrote seven stories in all. I think this is the best one."

"Seven stories!" exclaimed Kerwin, "Man, I thought summer holidays were for goofin' off - at least that's always how I spent mine--"

"Still do, no doubt!" Connie interjected with a laugh. "He probably didn't budge off his new hammock for the entire two months!"

"I'd put money on it!" Tony joined in.

"So I like my hammock!" sulked Kerwin.

Tony gave Kerwin a jovial pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Kerwin, we can't all be as gifted and productive as Tallia!"

Kerwin leaned down and muttered to Tallia, "Way to go, kid, you're making me look bad!"

"It's a gift!" chortled Tallia.

"Speaking of gifts," Tony said, turning a little more serious, "I'd really like to take a look at that story when Connie's finished with it, if I could?"

"Sure, I can use all the feedback I can get," said Tallia. "Just don't get your expectations up *too* high - it probably still needs a lot more work."

"I think the thing that needs more work is your confidence," admonished Tony. "I think working on the paper this year will help you do that."

"That's assuming I make it onto the paper," Tallia pointed out.

"Well, I'd say that's a fairly safe assumption," reasoned Tony. "After all there's a spot open on the paper for two junior high students."

"Yeah, you and Greg have it practically all sewn up," Connie said, "With your honourable mention in the literary contest and those articles Greg wrote for the paper when Dennis got sick last spring, you two should be a shoo-in!"

"We'll see," Tallia responded with half a smile.

The high-pitched whir of an electric wheelchair could suddenly be heard approaching the library. In a moment, fourteen-year-old Jo-Anne Hanson clunked and crashed her way through the door. Thin and lanky with short blonde hair and wearing jeans and a T-shirt, Jo-Anne seemed, in every possible way, a total contrast to Tallia. This contrast was further underscored by Jo-Anne's very apparent apprehension at finding that the casual cosy chat in which her best friend seemed engrossed involved the Vice-Principal. Why Tallia insisted on spending so much time hanging around with *staff* was beyond her, and she more than half resented the fact that Tallia seemed perfectly content to spend her first moments as a junior high student with the Vice-Principal instead of with her, and that she would now have to endure the official "And how was your summer, Jo-Anne?" just so she could get Tallia to make her official entrance into Grade Seven with her.

But presently, any negative vibes emanating from Jo-Anne were dispersed by Connie's innate amiableness. "Hey, there, Jo-Anne, ready for another year of hard labour?"

"We'll see." Jo-Anne's speech came slowly and was slightly more difficult to understand than Tallia's because her cerebral palsy was more severe. She parked directly in front of Tallia. "Been waiting for you downstairs for ten minutes," she chided her.

"Didn't Dorothy tell you I was up here?"

"Yeah, she did, but we'd said we'd meet downstairs at twenty to so we could go up to Mr. Murphy's class together, so I thought you were coming down," Jo-Anne explained in a slightly accusatory tone.

"Well, it's probably our fault for getting Tallia gabbing," Connie interjected pleasantly.

"Yeah, you know how gabby Tallia can get - especially with Connie and Mr. Harris," teased Kerwin.

Before Jo-Anne could respond, Tony came back at Kerwin with, "It's a wonder Tallia can get a word in edgewise with you around!"

"Well, some of us just have a gift for witty repartee!" Kerwin declared proudly.

"And which ones of us would that be?" Tallia crowed with delight.

"Smart kid!" muttered Kerwin.

"Thanks! I try!" grinned Tallia.

"Um, Tallia, I think you and Jo-Anne had better head off to class before this battle of wits turns into a full-scale war," Tony advised soberly.

"And Kermit loses - I get it!" Tallia chuckled as she turned on her chair. "Come on, Jo, we're outa here. See you later, Connie."

"Right," Connie smiled. "And good luck with the paper."

"Thanks," Tallia sighed, "I'll need it!"

"You *will not!*" Tony insisted. "See you later."

Tallia made her way to the door with Jo-Anne following behind her, silent and sulky. Tallia turned her head and addressed Kerwin, "Hey, Kermit," she smiled. "Still mad?"

"Nah, I don't get mad - at least not at you." Kerwin grinned deviously. "I get even!"

Once they were out in the hallway, Jo-Anne pulled up alongside Tallia and drove beside her, still not saying a word. Sounds of wheelchair traffic in the next hallway grew louder and louder as they approached the `intersection,` but still the silence was deafening. "Oh, good grief Jo, don't tell me you're going to sulk all day, just because I forgot to come meet you," sighed Tallia.

"I wanted to talk to you about what options we're going to sign up for before the guys came in and started doing their heckling routine," pouted Jo-Anne.

"But we already talked about that," Tallia reminded her sulking friend. "We're both going to take Home-Ec, and, if I get on the paper, it'll count as Special Projects."

"Great! What am I supposed to do while you're hobnobbing with the seniors?" whimpered Jo-Anne. "Not that you need to - you're already buddy-buddy with half the staff!"

"Connie and Kerwin are neat people - I like them!" Tallia retorted defensively. "Heck, everybody likes them! I thought you did too!"

"Connie and Kerwin are okay," Jo-Anne admitted. "But then there's your *pal the Vice-Principal!* What are the other junior-highers gonna think when they find out that you're buddy-buddy with Harris? They're going to think you're a spy, that's what!"

"Like I *care!* Mr. H is a really great guy," Tallia rejoined. "He's funny, and caring, and just--easy to talk to. I don't know why you don't see all that."

Having reached the confines of Mr. Murphy's as yet empty classroom, Jo-Anne felt at liberty to relieve herself of two year's worth of pent-up frustration. "Well, maybe it's because *I* don't have a *humungous crush* on the guy!"

Although it seldom happened, Tallia was sure she *must* have misunderstood Jo-Anne, "Say what!" she demanded.

"It's really kind of twisted when you think about it," Jo-Anne drawled. "I mean not only is the guy *married*, he's got *kids* who are *older than you are!*--"

Tallia was simply flabbergasted. "Where is all this coming from? Did your mom drop you on your head when she put you to bed last night, or what?!"

"It's coming from two years of watching you go *GA-GA* over the *Vice-Principal*!" Jo-Anne blurted out. "I mean, the way you're always talking and kidding around with him--it's just not *normal*!"

If there was one word in the English language guaranteed to set Tallia off, it was the word *normal.* Although she kept her voice determinedly low, its sharp, quick pace clearly betrayed her growing anger. "Not *normal*?! Well, I've got news for you Jo-Anne, this is not a *normal* school! We're here because we're crips, and most teachers out there in *normal* schools would get totally freaked out by us because *they* don't think *we're normal*. So if it's not *normal* for me to be friends with Mr. Harris, that's just too bad. I really don't care whether or not other people think I'm *normal*!"

"Well, if you were really as smart as Mr. Harris keeps saying you are, you would," Jo-Anne returned coldly. "Because in the end, it *does* matter what other people think."

The ensuing moment of stone-cold silence was broken by the growing whir of approaching electric wheelchairs. Soon, the classroom door was nudged wide open as the three male members of the seventh grade made their entrance. First in was Greg Watson, a sandy-haired thirteen-year-old who had long, lanky limbs, and a broad rib-cage which appeared deformed and bloated because of the muscle deterioration caused by Muscular Dystrophy. Close behind Greg came fourteen-year-old Zachary Collins, whose tuft of black hair and floppy-and-soggy-like arms, another trademark of Muscular Dystrophy, had long earned him the nickname Bert. Last in came Alex Thompson, sporting a fresh-cropped head of shaggy blonde hair. At twelve-and-a-half, the youngest of the group, Alex was usually content to follow behind his two older friends, with whom he shared not only a disease, one of the strongest ties that bound at Inglewood, but also an almost all-consuming passion for the school sport - floor hockey.

All three boys were immediately struck with the oddity of seeing Tallia and Jo-Anne sitting silent in the same room. For Zachary, this was an unbelievable opportunity to sharpen his infamous wit after a summer of having no one but his little sister Amy for a target. "Well, call the press! Gabby Gimp Sisters fall silent - film at eleven!"

When this mini-monologue drew no response but icy glares from the girls, Zachary turned to Greg for assistance. "Perhaps you, Dr. Freudenheimer, world renounced p-sss-y-chologist, could help us understand this phenomenon."

"Ja, of course," Greg jumped in with his best fake German accent, a farcical imitation of his grandfather. "You see, this ist ein classic case of Hardness of ze Nogenus compounded mit Catgottongueitus!"

"Well, Dr. Freudenheimer, what treatment would you recommend?" Zachary inquired, still in his official reporter's voice.

"I zink zhey should get intenzive shock therapy," Greg replied. "I zink zhey should be locked in a room with Mrs. Schultz for two hours and be forced to listen to her lecture on dental hygiene!"

On cue, the three boys began to chant in unison, "Now, remember kids, when you open wide, it's up and down not side to side!"

Despite this most noble effort, the response from the girls was disappointing. Jo-Anne grimaced and rolled her eyes, Tallia sighed heavily and turned around to survey the classroom. Spotting two desks placed together in an L-shape against a far wall, one of which had her prized Editor III electric typewriter sitting on it, Tallia recognized her refuge and fled to it. She immediately began busying herself with inspecting her typewriter, one of the newest in the school, to ensure that it had not in any way been harmed by a summer of idleness. Jo-Anne, also feeling the need to escape, wheeled over to the large window on the other side of the room and started silently counting the number of leaves on the large poplars that were beginning to turn yellow. This left the three boys to change their tactics, and get the girls to talk by a more subtle approach. "Boy, they were sure more fun in elementary!" Alex declared, shaking his head cautiously, so as to prevent his head from flopping backwards and getting stuck.

"Ah, I think they're suffering from P.J.H.S.!" announced Zachary.

"P.J.H.S.?" echoed Alex.

"Yeah, Pre Junior High Syndrome," Zachary explained, "It should wear off as soon as Study Hall starts and they get bored!"

Greg's laughter was abruptly cut short as his neck muscles suddenly gave out, causing his head to flop backwards and be stuck. Instantly, his breathing became laboured, and his voice almost nonexistent. "Hey, Zack--get--Tallia --"

After a quick glance over at his distressed friend, Zachary summoned the one and only member of the class who had enough range of motion to be of assistance. "Hey, Tallia, get over here! We have our first downing of the year!"

Instantly realizing that isolation was something that would simply never be practical at Inglewood, Tallia sprang into action as The Pickup Person, a job she had held since Grade One. Every time one of her classmates had an arm, or leg, or head fall victim to Gravity, it was Tallia's job to restore it to a functioning position. She scurried out of her fortified refuge and sped over to where Greg was sitting. Ever so carefully, she slipped her left hand underneath his head and gently pushed it forward. Once upright, Greg went into a coughing spasm which lasted several moments before subsiding. "Are you okay?" Tallia asked in concern.

"Yeah--" Greg let out one last cough before regaining normal speech. "Well, what do you know - SHE TALKS!" he declared triumphantly.

"Wouldn't be too smug about it, Mr. Smart Guy," Tallia warned. "I could put your head back down!"

"Nah, suffocating me like that might cause a scandal and screw up your chances of getting onto the paper - me being your major competition and all!" teased Greg.

"You'd better watch it, Mr. Competition," cautioned Tallia. "We might just end up being *partners!*"

"Both junior highs on the paper from Grade Seven?" questioned Greg. "That would be a total break from tradition."

"Yeah, but you and Tallia are the best writers in junior high - maybe even the whole school," reasoned Zachary. "It would only make sense for them to put both of you on the paper."

"Yeah, you guys could really show those seniors how to put out a paper!" Alex chimed in enthusiastically.

At this, Jo-Anne, who was still sitting at the window pretending to be oblivious to the ongoing conversation, heaved a great sigh. This reminded Greg that he had *almost* let Tallia off the hook as to what was going on with her and Jo-Anne, which wasn't his style at all. Turning to Zachary and Alex, he announced stoutly, "Well, if they do make us partners, I'll have to watch myself - wouldn't want to lose my powers of speech!"

Alex turned to Tallia, "What exactly *is* going on with you and Jo-Anne?" he asked earnestly.

Tallia cast an involuntary glance at Jo-Anne before turning back to Alex. "Never mind, Alex," she sighed. "It's just too stupid."

At that moment, Shaun Murphy breezed into his classroom in his usual energetic fashion. Dressed in his customary corduroy pants and turtleneck sweater, he looked in every way the easygoing yet responsible teacher. "Okay, Gang, time to get the noses back to the grindstone," he announced as he strode up to his desk at the front of the classroom.

"Gee, I don't know," Zachary piped up. "We MDs have pretty brittle bones, I think our poor little noses are too fragile to put to any grindstones!"

"Don't worry, I'll get you little nose-guards!" the teacher countered with a good-natured chuckle. "Now, if you'll all find your desks, we'll get down to work, starting with having a look at our class schedule."

The students obligingly found their desks, which were placed in a horseshoe shape in the middle of the room. The girls, who needed two desks, one of which was taken up by an electric typewriter, were seated at either end; the boys, who each had only one desk because they did not use typewriters, were seated in between; Greg sat beside Tallia, Zachary sat in the middle, and Alex sat beside Jo-Anne. Mr. Murphy began circulating among them, handing out class schedules and helping the boys get their arms up on the desks.

"Now, there's something I want you to notice about these timetables," Mr. Murphy said as he passed out the papers, "As you can see, Periods One and Two are supposed to be designated for Language Arts with Mrs. Tanner. However, unfortunately, she's home with the flu today, so--"

"We have a spare?!" Zachary interjected hopefully.

Mr. Murphy responded with a huge grin and an enthusiastic nod, "Nope!!"

A huge groan arose from the class.

"Actually, Mrs. Tanner left some assignments for you," Mr. Murphy informed his disappointed class.

Zachary rolled his eyes, "Let me guess! Write an essay on what you did on your summer vacation!"

"Well, that *is* Plan A," admitted Mr. Murphy.

"Does that mean there's a Plan B?" asked Greg.

"Yes, it does," Mr. Murphy responded. "Mrs. Tanner said that if any of you are interested in trying out for the school paper, you can use this time to write up your paragraph on why you want to be on the paper. The Special Projects

Committee will use these paragraphs to decide who gets to work on the paper, two juniors and four seniors. So are any of you interested?"

"Greg and Tallia are!" Zachary announced emphatically.

"Well, it seems we have two nominees!" Mr. Murphy chuckled. "So how about it, guys - are you interested?"

Greg glanced at Tallia and flashed a sly grin, "Anything to get out of writing that dumb essay!" he declared.

"Great, but I don't think you should use *that* in your paragraph!" laughed Mr. Murphy. "What about you, Tallia?"

"Ditto!" Tallia grinned. "But don't worry, I'll come up with something more creative for the paragraph!"

"I'm sure you will!" Mr. Murphy replied with another chuckle.

"When will they announce who gets onto the paper?" Greg asked, betraying his actual interest in the matter.

"Well, the Special Projects Committee meets at noon today, so I expect the announcement will be made during the Junior-Senior High Assembly in the basement gym."

"Who all is on the committee?" Tallia inquired boldly.

"Mr. Hogan, as the Students' Union Staff Advisor, Mrs. Stevens, as the Grade Ten homeroom teacher, and Mr. Harris," replied Mr. Murphy.

At the mention of Tony Harris' name, Tallia immediately felt the weight of Jo-Anne's icy stare. Turning quickly round to her typewriter, Tallia requested Mr.

Murphy's help in putting a sheet of paper into her typewriter. As he was obliging, she turned to him and asked, "When do we have to decide what option classes we want?"

"Well, if you get onto the paper, that will take care of one of them," Mr. Murphy smiled. "As for the others, we're going to have a class meeting to figure that out tomorrow."

Tallia settled down to work, trying very hard not to think about the fact that Jo-Anne hadn't said a word to her in over half an hour. She was acutely aware of the fact that the paragraph that she was now writing could very well have implications for the rest of her years at Inglewood, and perhaps even beyond. It was by concentrating on this thought that she endeavoured to push the constant reruns of her terrible argument with Jo-Anne from her mind. Try as she would, however, Tallia could not get over the fact that Jo-Anne, who was supposed to be her best friend, actually thought that *she* had a *crush* on *Mr. Harris*! It *was* true that, with the exception of Connie, Mr. Harris was her favourite person on the whole staff, but that wasn't because of something as *juvenile* as a crush, it was because she sensed that Mr. Harris genuinely cared about her and believed in her dream of becoming a writer. Tallia looked down at the blank page in her typewriter and determined that she wouldn't let Jo-Anne's weirdness make her let Mr. Harris down. Putting her shaky left hand down on her keyboard, she began typing.

The remainder of the morning passed surprisingly quickly for Tallia. It took her the entire eighty minute Language Arts period to write her paragraph for the Special Projects Committee. During the fifteen minute morning recess, Tallia sped from the classroom without waiting for Jo-Anne, as she normally would, and instead went straight to find Dorothy and get a drink of juice. When it came time to go back to the room for math class, Tallia made sure that she came in just before Mr. Murphy so that no one would have a chance to draw her into a conversation about the cause of the unusual but obvious tension between Jo-Anne and herself. For her part, Jo-Anne remained sulky all morning, breaking her silence only on the occasions when Mr. Murphy fired math drill questions at her.

When lunchtime rolled around, Tallia was again the first one out of the classroom and into the students' dining room, where she and Jo-Anne sat on either side of Dorothy, who had made a science of feeding each of them alternately. At one point during the meal, Dorothy remarked on how unusual it was to see them both so quiet. Feeling horribly obliged to say *something*, Tallia replied that, on her part at least, it probably had something to do with being a little anxious about the upcoming assembly and announcement about who made it onto the paper. This reply met with an understanding nod from Dorothy and a little impatient sigh from Jo-Anne. After enduring the usual fifteen-minute wait for her turn to be helped with the bathroom, Tallia had to decide what to do with the remaining forty-five minutes of her noon-hour. She had two options: go downstairs and watch the exhibition floor hockey game that was sure to be in progress in the main gym, or slip quietly into her classroom and read, while she prepared herself for the upcoming Moment of Truth. Opting for the latter, she breezed through the deserted second-floor hallways and into the welcome peacefulness of the empty classroom. She had only gotten to page two of *Pride and Prejudice* when she heard the approaching whir of an electric wheelchair in the hallway. In a moment, Jo-Anne made her tentative entrance, pushing the door open with her footrest and driving directly across the room to park in front of Tallia's desk. "Hi," she said quietly.

"Hi," Tallia responded shortly.

"You--didn't come down to watch the game," Jo-Anne began hesitantly, "How come?"

Tallia shrugged, "Didn't feel like it."

"Mr. Vanders wiped out on his runabout chair - it was really funny," Jo-Anne recounted rapidly. "The guys all said you should have been there to see it ... Felt kind of weird, me and the guys at the first game of the year without you there ... It just didn't feel--"

"*Normal*?" Tallia asked pointedly.

"Yeah," Jo-Anne sighed as she wriggled uncomfortably in her chair. "Look. Tallia, about this morning--I'm sorry, okay?--I was all freaked out about starting junior high, and I guess I went a little overboard--"

"*A little?!*" exclaimed Tallia. "You said I wasn't *normal* because I have a *crush* on *Mr. Harris!*"

"And you're saying you honestly *don't*?" questioned Jo-Anne.

"Yes, I am!" Tallia stated emphatically. "I'll try to explain it to you one more time. I *like* Mr. Harris. I can talk to him about stuff --like my writing--and he never talks down to me. It's like he really cares about what I have to say. I just like hanging out with him."

"But he's still the *Vice-Principal* and you're still a *student*," maintained Jo-Anne.

"Well, since I don't plan to make a new career out of skipping class or vandalizing the school, I don't see a problem," Tallia stated decisively.

"But--"

"Look, I'm going to keep hanging out with Mr. Harris whether you, or anybody else, like it or not," Tallia said flatly. "But since you're supposed to be my best friend, it might be nice if you at least understood it and got off my back."

"I still don't think I like it," Jo-Anne sighed. "But I guess I kind of understand it now."

"So you'll give the Teacher's Pet routine a rest?" asked Tallia.

"Yeah, okay," Jo-Anne relented. She held out a shaky hand to Tallia, "Truce?"

"Truce," Tallia smiled as she took Jo-Anne's hand.

"Well, we'd better get downstairs to the assembly," Jo-Anne announced, looking at her watch. "Wouldn't want to miss the big speech by your *favourite teacher*!"

"Brat!" Tallia chuckled, shaking her head. "Let's go."

By the time the girls got downstairs, the small gym was nearly filled with wall-to-wall wheelchairs - about forty in all. Spotting Greg sitting with Zachary and Alex near the back of the room, Tallia and Jo-Anne pulled up beside him. "What's this?!" Greg exclaimed in a tone of melodramatic surprise. "A reconciliation?"

"Yup, all is peace and tranquillity in Cripville once more!" Tallia grinned.

"Good, then *you* can nominate Jo-Anne for Grade Seven Students' Union Rep," said Greg.

"Sure, no problem!" Tallia enthusiastically agreed.

"Hey, wait a minute," Jo-Anne objected, "I thought Zack was going to be Class Rep."

"Nah, we had a meeting while you guys were off having your tearful reunion," teased Zachary. "I'm saving myself for Junior V.P. You're in, Jo."

Jo-Anne was becoming more and more flustered, "But--"

"You'd better not fight it, Jo," Tallia sniggered. "Some of *us* just have greatness thrust upon us!"

"*Us*?" Greg needled, chuckling.

"We shall see!" Tallia returned composedly.

Tallia's composure, at least her inner sense of composure, seemed to wane considerably as the assembly wore on. Although she took genuine pleasure in Zachary's election as Junior V.P., Jo-Anne's appointment as Class Rep, and even her own appointment to the Social Committee, she was growing increasingly anxious about the spot on the paper as she realized how much she really did want it. Sure, there was always next year, but that would be a whole year's worth of experience lost. What would she do if Greg got onto the paper and she didn't? What would she do if *she* got onto the paper and Greg didn't? She glanced across the room and spotted Tony sitting with some other teachers at the end of the front row. For a moment, she studied his broad oval face, trying to discern her destiny. Yet, she saw nothing but the usual look of pleasant contentment as he smoothed back his straight blonde hair. But presently, Mr. Hogan called him forward to help announce the names of the students who had got onto the paper. Was that a knowing glint that flashed across the blue-grey eyes as he glanced back at her before taking his place beside John Hogan at the front of the room? Her heart pounded painfully inside her as her limbs contracted and locked rigidly in spasm. But this was no time to draw attention to herself by having a major spaz attack. With fierce determination, she began taking deep breaths and focusing intently on what Mr. Hogan was saying.

"Now as you know, the newspaper staff is made up of four seniors and two juniors," stocky, brown-haired Mr. Hogan addressed the assembly. "Mr.

Harris says that he wants to announce the juniors, so I'll begin by announcing the seniors--"

Tallia's mind was racing. He *wants* to announce the juniors! That *must* mean--

"The seniors on the staff of the 1979-80 Inglewood Insider are Garnet Wilson and Terri Hunter as Co-Editors, Dennis Greenbaum, and Kimberly Kent."

Each name was followed by applause. All four of them were on the paper last year. Tallia was suddenly embarrassed by the thought that she was reading too much into Mr. Harris' actions. His wanting to announce the names of juniors could easily have nothing at all to do with *her* - there were at least eighteen other juniors sitting in the room. He *was* her favourite teacher, but that didn't mean she had to be his favourite student...

She bit her lip and looked directly--at the back of Mr. Murphy's head! She didn't dare look up at Mr. Harris for fear that he would look right through her. But she focused intently on his voice as it resounded through the room. "It's my *great pleasure* to announce that the two juniors on the staff of the 1979-80 Inglewood Insider are--"

Tallia held her breath.

"Greg Watson--"

An enormous cheer arose from the people around her. The suspense was over, they would *never* put two total rookies in with three veterans. There was nothing left to do but paste a big goofy grin on her face, pat Greg on the shoulder, and declare, "Way to go!" It was with that same goofy grin that she now looked directly up at Mr. Harris as if to prove that her ego had sustained no serious injury.

But as soon as she looked up, she saw that he was looking back at her with that same glint in his eyes. It *wasn't* her imagination - it was as real as the huge grin that was on his face as he again leaned to the microphone and announced triumphantly, "And Tallia Taves!"

Shouts of "Seven's Sweep!" could immediately be heard from Zachary and Alex. Greg turned to her with his characteristically sly grin and declared, "Howdy, Partner!"

It took several moments for Tallia to break out of the daze she had been thrown into and come up with a suitable response. A quiet "What do you know!" escaped before she came out with the official comeback. "And I didn't even have to suffocate you! See! When you've got it, you've got it!"

"I know!" Greg replied smugly.

The assembly was over and the crowd of students began filing out for recess. Tallia's classmates eagerly joined in the throng straining for the door, but she quite willingly lingered behind, wanting to savour her moment of triumph. Soon, she saw the *other* reason for wanting to stick around striding towards her with a big grin and outstretched arms. Tony stopped in front of her and gently but firmly took both her spasm-clenched hands into his. "Congratulations, Kiddo, you did it!" he declared. "Your paragraph was excellent! Of course that wasn't any surprise to me!--"

"Well, it was to *me*!"

"Well, it shouldn't have been," Tony said firmly. Releasing her hands, he looked at his watch, "So you've got fifteen minutes to celebrate before Mrs. Steadford puts you to work in typing class. How are you going to spend it? As if I didn't know!"

Tallia giggled delightedly, "I've got to go up and tell Connie - as if you didn't know!"

"Mind if I tag along?" asked Tony. "You and Kerwin may need a referee!"

"Good point!" Tallia chuckled as she turned on her wheelchair. "Come on."

"Movin' right along," Tony grinned as he took hold of her handlebar and began walking beside her, humming the song "Movin' Right Along" from the Muppet Movie.

Tallia made her triumphal entrance into the library with Tony beside her, still humming. Connie and Kerwin immediately took note of their jubilant entry. "Well, it sure looks like somebody had a good time at the assembly!" Connie greeted them with a smile. "What's the news?"

Tony turned to Tallia and put his arm around her shoulder, "What do you say? - Can I tell them?" he asked eagerly.

Tallia chuckled and shook her head, "Well, you *are* the *Vice-Principal*, so I guess that means you can pretty much get your own way!"

"You know, you always were an exceptionally bright individual!" declared Tony.

"Shrewd answer, kid - real shrewd!" Kerwin proclaimed.

"Okay, guys, enough with the comedy routine - I want to know what happened!" Connie burst out.

"Well, in that case," Tony grinned as he made a dramatic sweep with his hand. "Lady and Gentleman, may I present the newest member of the staff of The Inglewood Insider, and Inglewood's new writer-in-residence, Miss Tallia Taves!"

"*Yes!*" Connie exclaimed in delight. "Didn't I tell you, Tallia!"

"That's what I love about you, Connie," chuckled Tallia, "You *never* say *I TOLD YOU SO*!"

"Well, in this case, I have every right to say *I TOLD YOU SO* because this is where it all starts," Connie said firmly. "I think this is going to be the first step in a long and brilliant writing career!"

"Connie, I think you're absolutely right," declared Tony. "I think what we're witnessing here is the birth of the country's next great literary talent!"

Tallia giggled delightedly, "Well, if *the country's next great literary talent* ever needs an *agent*, you've got the job!"

As Tallia sat in the Inglewood library that golden autumn afternoon basking in the bright spotlight of triumph and the soft warm glow of friendship, her subconscious mind registered the fact that life on this planet just does not get any better. The new school year, though still in its infancy, held the promise of challenges and opportunities for developing her talent that she had only dreamt of before. Buoyed by the abiding faith of Connie and Tony, Tallia determined to meet all of the challenges head-on. Her career as a writer had finally officially begun.

CHAPTER TWO - ROLLIN' ON THE RIVER

As Tallia glanced around at the group assembled in the now familiar surroundings of Mr. Murphy's classroom at Inglewood, she was suddenly struck by the fact that, over the past nine months, she had become thoroughly used to being considered a leader in the Students' Union as well as the newspaper. Three times over the past nine months, Mr. Harris had reprinted one of her Insider articles in the Education Department Newsletter. Gone were the initial apprehensions, the fear that her ideas were not good enough. She had become secure in the respect of her student colleagues as well as that of many staff members. It was with this confidence that Tallia turned to Zachary and began to respond to a question about the up-coming camp, "What we need--" Confidence or no, Tallia was forced to pause in order to swallow the over-abundance of saliva that suddenly flooded her mouth. "What we need is something that *everybody* can get involved in - students *and* staff ... Something that everybody will get a kick out of."

"What? You mean like Kangaroo Court?" asked Zachary.

"Not exactly--the court could only be so big, and it might be hard to keep coming up with original judgements," Tallia said thoughtfully. "I was thinking more of a staff roast--"

Zachary's dark eyes flashed with delight, "Are we talkin' *bonfire time* here?"

"Not quite," Tallia chuckled as she shook her head. "We're talkin' a big dinner with people giving incriminating speeches about the staff."

Zachary chimed in using his official Vice-Presidential tone. "I think we should get Tallia to start making up a list of who's going to roast who."

Thus, Tallia was busy during her sixth period spare drawing up the list of student roasters and staff roastees, and listening to the communal class musings about the hitherto secret and forbidden pleasures that awaited them at camp.

"I heard that Dennis Greenbaum pulled a four pound trout out of Lake Loon last year!" Alex exclaimed dreamily.

Jo-Anne wrinkled her nose in disgust. "They didn't actually make him *eat it* or anything, did they?!"

"Of course they did!" Alex declared. "It's the first rule of good sportsmanship - You catch it, you eat it!"

"I'd rather be a bad sport and skip the food poisoning, thanks!"

"Speaking of food," Zachary interjected, "How much extra food do you think we'll need for the staff who come out to camp for the roast, Tallia?"

Tallia picked up the list of names that lay beside her typewriter, a task which was prolonged unnecessarily as her arm went into spasm.

"I'm not sure," she sighed. "It's only an hour and a half drive out of town, so I suppose a lot of people will drive out for the evening. I know that Connie and a couple of other support staff are planning to drive out on Thursday, and Mr. Harris is coming on Wednesday night. But every time I think I've got all the names down, I come up with someone else I've forgotten. This is turning out to be a lot more work than I thought it would be!"

"Well, I guess that's what you get for having those *brilliant ideas*!" Greg was irritatingly smug.

"Yeah, you should have limited your participation in Exec meeting to just nodding or shaking your head, like Jo-Anne usually does," said Zachary.

Jo-Anne waded into the conversation. "It's just that I know that Tallia's a lot better at dreaming up these wacky schemes than I am. - Her mind's much more warped than mine." She swallowed in order to keep her impaired speech intelligible. "So it's really much more productive for me just to go along with whatever Tallia comes up with."

"Yeah, right!" scoffed Tallia. "You were just smart enough to realize that if you actually offered any brilliant ideas of your own, you'd get stuck doing the work to make them happen!"

"Well, there *is* that," Jo-Anne admitted.

"But I think this Staff Roast idea is your best idea yet," declared Alex. "Maybe it will even keep the seniors preoccupied enough to forget about the whole initiation thing."

"Come on, Alex, don't tell me you're actually worried about this junior camp initiation crap," Greg admonished in his best big-brotherly tone.

"No--well, not really--" Alex faltered. "It's just that it's supposed to be even worse than frosh week. I heard that they kidnapped a couple of guys in Grade Seven and made them sleep in the *girls'* cabin last year!"

"Don't you worry, Alex," laughed Tallia, "If you're kidnapped and forced to sleep in our cabin, Jo-Anne and I will protect your honour! Won't we, Jo?!"

"Well, we'll *try*!" Jo-Anne giggled.

Alex rolled his eyes. "Great! Now I've got *nothing* to worry about!"

"So how are the match-ups going?" asked Zachary.

"Not bad, I still have eight more staff to match up," she sighed. "Let's see ... All you guys are doing someone, except ... Hey, Jo-Anne, you didn't put down who you wanted to roast."

"That's because there's no way you're getting me up on stage to roast anyone," Jo-Anne stated emphatically. "I'd just end up making a fool of myself."

"But Jo, we're *all* going to do it," argued Tallia.

"Yeah, but you guys are all good at stuff like this, I'm not," insisted Jo-Anne. "I'm not doing it, and that's final."

"Great!" muttered Tallia. "And I was hoping you would roast Dorothy. Now I have to find someone *else*."

"Well, you'd better get the lead out," admonished Zachary, "Only six more days till camp, you know!"

Before Tallia knew it, the camp countdown had gone from six days to two, and her excitement and anxiety levels had rocketed sky high. It was Saturday morning, and Tallia was in her room, overseeing the packing process. "Did Pop bring my sleeping bag up from the basement?" Tallia asked as she watched her mother carry an armful of clothes from the bulging closet to the open suitcase that lay on the bed.

"I don't know," Anna sighed wearily as she dumped her load of clothes onto the bed and walked over to the doorway. "Jacob, Jacob," she called. "Where are you?"

A sleepy and slightly grumpy Travis emerged from his bedroom. "What's all the racket?"

"I'm trying to find your father," Anna explained. "Sorry I woke you."

"'Bout time he got up, if you ask me," Tallia interjected from inside her bedroom.

"Well, nobody asked you, did they," retorted Travis.

"I'll have you know that *I've* been up packing for two hours already," Tallia said haughtily.

Travis was sceptical. "What's there to pack for two hours? I mean, it's not like you're really roughing it or anything. Camp Horizons is a pretty cushy setup--heated cabins, a heated swimming pool. It's hardly *real camping*."

"Oh yeah? Then why do I have to take all this *real camping* gear--pillows, a foam mattress, a sleeping bag--"

The entrance of her father reminded Tallia of yet another vital detail that she needed to take care of in preparation for this *real* camping trip. "Pop, when are we going to the camping supply store to get my rain cape?"

"Maybe we could do that around two," Jacob suggested.

"But Pop, I was going to use the car to go to the library this afternoon," objected Travis. "My motorbike's still on the fritz."

"Well, in that case, maybe I can just take the bus and go down to the camping supply store by myself--" began Jacob.

Tallia was swift and vigorous in her protest, "No, Pop, that won't work at all. I have to come with you to make sure the cape's the right length and stuff--"

"I'm sure I'll be able to figure it out," Jacob said calmly.

"But I really wanted to go and check out the store myself," argued Tallia. "I might think of something else I need."

"To go to a crip-camp that's an hour-and-a-half out of town? Yeah, it's real likely that you're going to need heavy-duty camping equipment!" scoffed Travis.

"Well--Pop promised he'd take me to the camping store today."

"It's true, Jacob, you *did* promise to take her," sighed Anna.

"Yes, I guess I did," said Jacob. "All right, Tallia, we'll both go to the camping supply store this afternoon."

"Great! And how am I supposed to get to the library?" muttered Travis.

"Well, can't you take the bus?" she asked reasonably.

"On a weekend? It would take forever."

"All right, here's what I'll do," came the official fatherly pronouncement. "I'll take Tallia to the store at one, but I'll make sure we'll be back in an hour so that you'll have plenty of time to get to the library."

"Okay, I guess that will work," consented Travis.

Jacob and Anna had always made a conscious effort not to let the special needs of their daughter cause them to ignore the needs of their son. For the most part, they succeeded in their objective. Ultimately however, the fact remained that Tallia very often did monopolize her parents' attention. Fortunately, the very real potential for Travis to develop feelings of resentment were considerably diminished by the fact that, when it came right down to it, he had always felt very protective of his little sister. So it was that, when the trip to the camping supply store was over, and after he had returned from an exceptionally productive afternoon at the library, Travis took Tallia out into the back yard and gave her casting lessons with his fishing rod.

The sky was mostly sunny as Tallia made her way to school on Monday morning, but as she looked out the Handi-Van window, she nervously eyed a cluster of dark clouds gathering on the western horizon. It wouldn't *dare* rain - she, Jo-Anne and the guys had already decided that the first thing they would do when they got settled in at camp this afternoon would be to get Kerwin to take them out fishing on the barge. Although Tallia had not been away from home very often, it did not occur to her to feel any pangs of homesickness over this trip. She knew that she'd be very well looked after with Dorothy around. Despite the fact that Dorothy had been her nurse for almost half of elementary, and now into junior high, Tallia had had enough experience with other nurses to realize that having a good nurse who wasn't constantly on your back for something or other was not something to be taken for granted.

"So Tallia, you all ready for our big adventure?" Dorothy greeted her cheerily as she entered the waiting area of the bus entrance.

"Long as you promise to protect me from the bears, no problem!" Tallia replied. "Any of my gang here yet?"

"Just Alex, so far," replied Dorothy. "His dad dropped him off a few minutes ago. I think he's sitting over by the elevators."

Tallia headed off through the waiting area, and found Alex sitting alone by the double elevators. "Hey, Alex, ready to conquer the wilds of Camp Horizons?"

"Yeah, bring on that wildlife to run over!" Alex's tone was cheery, but his voice sounded very hoarse, and his chuckle soon turned into a dry, weak cough.

"Alex, are you okay? You don't sound so good."

Alex raised and lowered his limp hand in a dismissive motion. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I just woke up this morning with a bit of a sore throat."

"That means you're getting a cold!" exclaimed Tallia. "Have you told Dorothy or Dave?"

"No!" Alex said emphatically. "They might make me stay home, and there's no way I'm missing this camping trip. I'm supposed to roast Kermit, remember?"

"Yeah, but a cold isn't something for you MD guys to fool around with. Remember what happened to Dennis last year? He got a cold and wound up in the hospital for four months!"

"Look, I'm not gonna miss my first camping trip because I've got a stupid frog in my throat," insisted Alex. "I'm not telling Dorothy or Dave anything, and neither can you - you've got to promise."

Before Tallia could respond, Tony came up and greeted them. "Hi, guys, you all ready to hit the road?"

Alex responded with a strategic nod.

"How about you, Tallia? How are those diabolical roast plans going?"

Still concerned about Alex, Tallia paused in order to come up with a suitably light-hearted response. "Oh, they're going nice and--diabolically. So, you're not going to pull anything sneaky on me, like not showing up for the roast, are you?"

"Well, that *would* probably be the *smart* thing for me to do!" chuckled Tony. "But then, you would probably never forgive me!"

"Probably not!" Tallia said smugly.

"Well, in that case, I'll be there in plenty of time for the roast," smiled Tony. "I should arrive on Wednesday evening, just in time for supper." Hearing the whir of approaching wheelchairs behind him, Tony turned around and saw Zachary, Greg, and Jo-Anne coming to join their classmates for the final camp countdown. "Well, here come some more great outdoorsmen."

"Outdoors-*people*," Tallia corrected him sternly.

"My humblest apologies! Outdoors-*people*!"

"It's okay, Mr. Harris, the guys can *have* the great outdoors all to themselves for all I care," said Jo-Anne. "Give me a heated cabin, my curling iron, and my ghetto-blaster, and I'm happy."

"Wimp!" teased Zachary.

"And proud of it!" countered Jo-Anne.

"Well, I think I'll go get to work and leave you guys to battle this out. I'll see you on Wednesday night," Tony said, turning on his heel. "And Tallia, let's go gentle on roasting us poor Vice-Principals - we burn easy!"

"We'll see!"

When Tony had left, Greg turned to Alex and saw from his worn expression that something was wrong. "Hey, Alex, what's the story? I thought you'd be bouncing off the walls this morning. How come you're so mellow?"

Alex cleared his throat and took a deep breath in an effort to shore up his failing voice. "It's no big deal, I'm just tired - it was a really early morning." Unfortunately, the robustness that Alex tried so hard to project was instantly shattered by a coughing spasm.

"Early morning, my eye!" said Greg. "You're sick, aren't you?"

"It's just a little scratchy throat," insisted Alex. "I got Mom to give me a couple of aspirin before I left --told her I had a monster headache--I'll be fine once they kick in."

"I told him that he should tell Dorothy or Dave," said Tallia. "But he won't hear of it."

"Tallia has a point, you know, Alex," said Greg. "Maybe they could give you something to knock out this bug."

"Or maybe they could just make me stay home." Alex let out a heavy sigh. "Look, I may be the youngest around here, but that doesn't mean you guys can boss me around. This sore throat thing is nothing, I'm gonna be fine, and there's no way I'm gonna miss this camping trip because of it. I'm not telling the nurses anything and neither can you. You've all got to promise."

"But what if you get worse?--"

"C'mon Tallia, *please*?"

Tallia took a deep breath. "All right, all right, I won't say anything - I promise." The others promised as well.

Alex let out a sigh of relief, "Thanks, guys. You won't be sorry - I promise."

"I hope not," Tallia said grimly.

At 9:15, a huge blue and white school bus pulled into the garage, and immediately began the very long process of loading twenty-two staff members and thirty-five students along with their suitcases, sleeping-bags, wheelchairs, walkers, stretchers, commodes, and various other pieces of essential equipment, such as the floor hockey sticks and nets. Inglewood *never* travelled light. Hence, in typical Inglewood fashion, the final roll-call and departure came about fifteen minutes behind schedule. Although there was a general air of excitement in the bus, Tallia felt strangely cut off from it. Sitting by a window near the back of the bus beside Alex, who seemed to be trying his best to doze off, and behind Jo-Anne, with whom anything other than face-to-face communication was pretty much impossible, Tallia was left to gaze silently out the window and watch the endless blur of barns, wheat fields, and grazing cattle streaking past. By the time the bus turned off the main highway and onto the narrow road that led to Camp Horizons, the patches of cloud that had seemed to follow the bus all the way from the city had consolidated into one great grey mass which engulfed the entire sky. Out of her window, Tallia could now see small pieces of Lake Loon glimmering from between the large grove of pine and poplar trees that surrounded it. Soon the bus was filled with the heavy, damp, scent of newly-blossomed lilacs that wafted in through the driver's open window. Then, as the bus passed the little white sign that read, "CAMP HORIZONS - 1 KM," the view out the window suddenly became blurred by huge blotchy raindrops. The seniors sitting in the front of the bus burst into a rousing rendition of "RAINDROPS KEEP FALLIN' ON MY HEAD." Alex woke with a jolt and began coughing heavily, his lungs sounding more congested than ever. Tallia's heart sank. *This* was *camp*?

As the process of getting the campers and their gear off the bus and into their respective cabins began, the sky opened up fully and the drizzle turned into a downpour. The first order of business for the staff was to crack open the suitcases and get everyone into dry clothes. After getting changed, Tallia and Jo-Anne staked out their turf, two beds in the far corner of the cabin.

"Well, then, I guess I'm in this one," Dorothy said cheerily as she plopped her suitcase down on the bed beside Tallia's. "Now, you two aren't going to gab and keep me up all night, are you?"

"Nah, just half the night," Jo-Anne replied airily, "Right, Tallia?"

But Tallia's mind was busy with Alex. "Huh? Wha?"

"We're not going to gab and keep Dorothy up all night, just half the night," repeated Jo-Anne.

"Oh, yeah, right," Tallia responded absently.

"Tallia, you seem a little preoccupied. Is something wrong?" Dorothy asked.

"No - no, not really," Tallia said, rousing herself. "I guess I'm just nervous about getting this roast stuff organized, and this rain is kind of a downer."

"Well, let's go down to the main lodge and grab some lunch," said Dorothy, "I'm sure life will look better on a full stomach."

"Yeah, you might be right," Tallia responded.

After lunch it was still pouring outside. The afternoon activity was changed from a hike to a film and a lecture by Mr. Murphy on the plant and animal life indigenous to the area. Tallia sat constantly eyeing Alex, watching fearfully for any sign that his cold was getting worse. For his part, Alex did his level best to avoid Tallia's gaze and suppress any signs of his cold. At four o'clock, when the wildlife lecture was dismissed, and the Inglewood students and staff were free to move the furniture to one side and do what they did best, *play floor hockey*, Alex was the first to volunteer to play goal. And when, after supper, the entire group adjourned to the heated indoor swimming pool, Alex was most vigorous in his aquatic frolicking. But around the campfire later on, Tallia noticed that he seemed to be shivering and that his breathing was laboured. The image haunted her even after Dorothy had put her to bed and stepped out to a brief staff meeting.

"Are you okay, Tallia?" Jo-Anne's hushed voice came from the bed beside her. "You've been so quiet all night."

"Yeah, I'm okay," Tallia sighed, snuggling down into her sleeping bag. "I just can't stop worrying about Alex. It looked like his breathing was really heavy."

"Yeah, I noticed that too," Jo-Anne said quietly.

"I hope we did the right thing." Tallia said slowly.

"Well, it's not like Alex gave us much choice," Jo-Anne pointed out. "He was pretty emphatic about not wanting anyone to know."

"Yeah, I know, but--"

Jo-Anne patted Talia on the shoulder. "Look, there's not much point in beating yourself up about it. Besides, he might even be better tomorrow."

"I hope so," sighed Tallia.

"So what do you want to do during free time tomorrow?" Jo-Anne asked, strategically changing the subject.

"The guys were talking about getting Kerwin to take them out on the barge in the morning, if the weather's half decent. I'll probably go with them."

"Think I'll pass on that one - sounds a little too Gilligan's Island to me!" declared Jo-Anne. "What about the afternoon?"

"I'm not sure," yawned Tallia. "I guess I'll have to meet with Terri at some point to go over the bit she's doing for Dorothy at the roast."

Jo-Anne heaved a martyrish sigh. "Great! Sounds like you're going to be about as much fun tomorrow as you were today!"

"Well, I wouldn't have to have that meeting with Terri tomorrow if *somebody* had agreed to do the roast for Dorothy when I asked her to," Tallia responded pointedly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," sulked Jo-Anne.

Several minutes of silence followed.

"Tallia?"

"Huh?"

"You're not asleep, are you?"

"I'm getting there--"

"But I thought we were going to stay up and talk."

"Yeah, I know. But it's been a long day, and I'm beat," yawned Tallia. "We'll stay up and talk tomorrow night, okay?"

"Okay," came the grudging reply, "Goodnight, Tal."

"Goodnight, Jo."

Tallia opened her eyes the next morning to the sight of small shafts of sunlight streaming through the cabin window. This was an omen, it *had* to be. The gloom of yesterday had been dispelled; today would be much better. Eager to test her theory, Tallia volunteered to be the first to have a bed-bath and be dressed. She was thus out the cabin door and off to the main lodge before Jo-Anne was even fully awake. When she entered the main lodge, she found the boys sitting at a table with Kerwin, drinking hot chocolate and engaged in what looked like a rather intense conversation. "Remember, Mr. Vanders, you promised," Alex was saying.

Alex's voice was still hoarse, but it did sound a little better than yesterday. "Promised to do what?" she asked as she pulled up to the table.

"Oh, good morning, Tallia," Kerwin greeted her cheerily. "The guys were just trying to convince me to take them out fishing on the barge this morning."

"Good," said Tallia. "But what's with this *them* thing? If you're going fishing, I'm going too."

"We just figured that fishing was--you know--a *guy thing*," Greg explained.

"That's grossly out-dated thinking." Tallia was indignant. "Girls can be just as into all that outdoorsy stuff as guys."

"Oh, yeah?" challenged Zachary. "What about Jo-Anne? Her idea of outdoor sports is channel-surfing on the portable TV in the back yard!"

"Well, Jo-Anne's-- Jo-Anne's the exception that proves the rule," Tallia stated emphatically. "So, how about it, Kermit, are you taking *us* fishing on the barge this morning?"

Kerwin's eyes crinkled as he laughed, "Well, how can I argue with such determination! If the weather holds, we'll go right after breakfast."

Admittedly, the first sight of the contraption that everyone referred to as "the barge" gave Tallia a moment's pause. The large floating platform with high rails around it, equipped with a motor and a steering device did not inspire confidence. "Are you *sure* this thing won't *sink* once we all pile onto it?" Tallia asked Kerwin as he flipped over the large iron plate that served as a ramp between the barge and the dock.

"Never fear, Tallia," chuckled Kerwin. "This barge has safely carried generations of Inglewood students across this lake."

"It's not so much the getting across I'm worried about," said Tallia. "It's the getting back!"

"Hey, Tallia, get a load of the sign on the front of the barge," said Greg. "The H.M.S. Freewheeler - 15 years of rollin' on the river!"

Tallia rolled her eyes. "That's real cute," she said. "But I thought this was a lake!"

Kerwin proceeded to guide each of the chairs down the narrow ramp and onto the barge. Life jackets were put on, the motor was started, and they were off. This was the first time that Tallia had ever been on any kind of watercraft, and she found that she loved the sensation of freedom that came from gliding across the fresh, cool water. Having reached the middle of the lake, Kerwin stopped the motor, got out the fishing gear, baited the hooks, and helped Tallia and the boys cast their lines. Two blissful hours of doing nothing but dangling fishing lines and almost being lulled to sleep by the gentle waves underneath a clear blue sky followed. *This is **definitely** more like it,* thought Tallia.

But gradually, the sky began to cloud over and the wind turned brisk and biting. "Well, gang, I think it's time to reel in and head back," Kerwin said, eyeing the sky.

"But none of us have caught anything yet," objected Alex. "Can't we have just five more minutes, *please*?"

Four-and-a-half of the five minutes ticked by without event, but then, suddenly, Tallia felt a tug on her line. At first she thought it was just the pull of the current, but then came an even stronger tug, and then an even stronger one that almost ripped the fishing rod out of her hands. "Hey, Mr. V, come quick!" she called excitedly, "I think I've got something!"

Kerwin got to Tallia just in time to prevent the fishing rod from being torn out of her hands. He got a grip on the rod and helped her reel in the line. At the end of the line was a six-pound silver trout. Though the fish was feisty, it could not, in the end, prevail against the determined duo. Soon it was lying lifeless on the floor of the barge for all to admire.

Alex was wide-eyed. "What a beauty!"

"Yeah!" Greg chimed in.

"No kidding!" Zachary exclaimed. "Way to go, Tallia!"

"Well, Tallia, it looks like you've caught yourself dinner tonight!" declared Kerwin. He glanced apprehensively up at the ever-darkening sky, "And now we'd better get ourselves back to camp - looks like it could start raining any minute."

With the utmost efficiency, both fish and fishing gear were packed up, the motor was started, and they headed back across the lake. Nevertheless, just as they were about halfway to shore, torrents of rain came crashing down upon the barge and its passengers. The solid sheets of water pouring from the sky obliterated Tallia's vision and the gusts of wind that now seemed to blow from every direction made it virtually impossible for her to breathe. For one terrifying instant, the thought of drowning crossed her mind, but then the rain and wind subsided slightly and, in the distance, she could see two figures standing on the dock. The boys too were having their troubles; Greg and Zachary were having difficulty catching their breath, and Alex's head had flopped back and was stuck, closing off his windpipe. Fortunately, Tallia was sitting close enough to Alex for her to reach over and push his head up. "Hang on, Alex!" she yelled against the wind. "We're almost there!"

As the barge slowly made its way to the dock, Tallia could identify the two rain-caped figures as Mr. Murphy and Dave, the boys' nurse. "We were just about to get in the motorboat and come looking for you," Mr. Murphy called out to Kerwin as he watched him pull the barge up alongside the dock and moor it. "Are the kids okay?"

"I think Greg, Zachary and I are," Tallia responded quickly. "But something seems to be wrong with Alex, he's shivering."

"Could be the onset of hypothermia," said Dave. "We'd better get them to their cabins as quickly as possible."

Tallia, Greg, Zachary, and Alex were whisked off the barge at warp speed. At her cabin Tallia found a pacing committee of two waiting for her. "Tallia! What happened?" Jo-Anne demanded the minute Tallia came clunking and crashing through the door. "I was already afraid you guys were like *dead* or something! *WHAT HAPPENED?*"

"We got caught in a cloudburst because I caught a fish," Tallia explained simply.

Jo-Anne wrinkled her forehead in confusion, "I don't suppose you wanna try running that one by me again?"

"I think the explanations can wait, Tallia," Dorothy used her official nurse's tone. "We'd better get you changed out of those wet clothes before you catch your death."

In the boys' cabin, all of Alex's efforts to conceal the fact that he had a cold were undone in a matter of minutes. As he tried to change Alex's clothes, Dave noticed that Alex was shivering and that his breathing was laboured. Taking his temperature and listening to his lungs with a stethoscope, Dave discovered that he was running a fever and his lungs were rather congested. Alex was immediately given a shot of penicillin, treated with a vaporiser, and packed off to bed for the next twenty-four hours. Although he did very little except sleep the entire time, he was constantly monitored by a member of the nursing staff. The calm reassurances of these nurses were of very little comfort to Tallia, who felt unbearable guilt for not having told Dorothy that Alex was getting sick in the first place.

It was not until late Wednesday afternoon that Tallia found some relief for her anxiety. By this time, Alex was fully awake and strong enough to begin pestering Dave to be allowed to join the others in the main lodge for supper. After much debate on the part of the staff, and even more begging, pleading, and haranguing on the part of Alex, he was allowed to get up and join the others for supper.

Tallia, who was already keeping her eyes on the door in anticipation of Tony's arrival, was filled with relief at the sight of Alex whirring into the main hall. She and her classmates immediately gathered around him and began their questioning.

"Hey, you're up!" Tallia nervously began by stating the obvious. "How're you feelin'?"

"A lot better," Alex stated emphatically, eyeing Dave as if to make sure he got the point. "Sore throat's almost all gone."

"So, do ya wanna go fishin'?!" needled Zachary.

"Har, har, very funny!" sneered Alex. "I'd settle for whopping you at floor hockey."

Zachary hesitated and looked at Greg as if appealing to him to find a graceful way to bail him out. "Maybe we should hold off on that for a bit. I mean, you *did* just get up and all," said Greg.

"Oh no! You're not gonna pull that Big Brother trip on me, are you? It's almost as bad as that Nurse trip I get from Dave!" Alex groaned.

"I just meant that you might wanna take it easy for a while," Greg explained calmly. "After all, there's no point in risking a relapse, is there?"

"What relapse? I told you already - The sore throat's almost all gone and I'm *fine*," insisted Alex. "Why can't anybody trust me to know what's going on with my own body?"

"Okay, *Dr. Thompson*, we give up," sighed Greg. "You want a floor hockey showdown, you've got one. C'mon, they're starting to set up the nets."

"Okay," Alex said, quickly moving his limp hand onto the joystick.

The laborious process of moving the hand from the armrest to the control box was abruptly halted by a word from Dave. "Not so fast, Mr. Gretsky! I'm afraid you're playing bench for this one."

"Aw, but Dave--"

"Sorry, Bud, but Dorothy wasn't too keen on the idea of you getting out of bed in the first place," said Dave. "If she came in and saw you tearing around here playing floor hockey, she'd blow a gasket."

"He's right," Tallia said quickly. "I've seen that happen before - it's *not* pretty!"

"But I wanted to play you guys," sulked Alex.

"Maybe tomorrow," Greg said.

"Besides, while we watch the game, I could really use help in going over the program notes for tomorrow night," said Tallia. "I need all the help I can get."

"She *soitainly does*!" added Greg.

"Okay," Alex gave in. "I guess I *am* the best person to help Tallia out, what with my superior intelligence and wit!"

"Gee, Dave, I think all those vapours have swelled his head!" laughed Zachary.

"Very funny," said Alex.

Tallia was greatly relieved to see that Alex really did seem much stronger, though she remained apprehensive about the fact that his lungs still seemed rather congested. However, she was reassured by the knowledge that Dave and Dorothy would never have allowed Alex to get out of bed if he wasn't truly better. Her mind thus eased somewhat about Alex, Tallia was free to indulge in nervous anxiety about whether or not Tony would arrive in time for supper, as she had prepared quite a surprise for him. Her anxiety reached its peak when, at 5:45, the floor hockey nets were put away and there was still no sign of Tony. Leaving Alex engaged in giving Greg and Zachary a critique of their floor hockey performance, Tallia rolled over to the far window that looked out onto the parking lot and began an anxious vigil. In a few minutes, her watchfulness was rewarded by the sight of a silver-grey Toyota pulling into the parking lot. The car door opened and out bounded Tony, who, seeing Tallia sitting at the window, broke into a huge grin and waved. He then sprinted toward the door, where she met him with a mischievous grin.

"So how's my fisher-*person*?" he greeted her jovially, taking her hand. "I talked to Kerwin on the phone last night and he told me about your big adventure."

"What exactly did Kerwin tell you?" Tallia asked with a start.

"He said that you and the boys went out on the barge to fish and got caught in a cloudburst," replied Tony. "Why? Is there more to the story?"

"Oh, you'll see!" Tallia smiled smugly. Turning to the group that was beginning to gather around the nearby tables, she announced in a loud voice, "Mr. Harris is here and I think he's hungry. Could somebody bring out his supper, please?"

Tallia's request sent Kerwin scurrying into the kitchen. "Okay, so what *is* for supper?" Tony asked, rubbing his hands together in eager anticipation.

"Well, we're all having hamburgers, but you're having fish," announced Tallia.

"Fish?" echoed Tony, "What fish?"

On cue, Kerwin dragged the cooler with the fish in it out from the kitchen and opened it. "The fish Tallia caught!"

Tony grew wide-eyed, "*Tallia* caught this fish?"

"Yup! Not a bad *fisher-person,* eh?" teased Tallia.

"It's a beaut!" declared Tony.

"And it's all yours!" Tallia announced. "After you clean it, of course!"

Students and staff began to chuckle, and Tony rocked back on his heels as he laughed in delight. "Nice try, kiddo! But you caught it, so you have to at least help clean it!"

"What? Are you going to just give me a knife and expect me to clean it?"

"No, I'm going to help you guide the knife so that *we* can clean the fish together!" Tony declared triumphantly.

What followed was a half hour of high entertainment for the assembled group. The expression on Tallia's face as Tony guided her in cutting off the fish's head was simply beyond the capacity of any camera to capture. Yet she followed through with the cleaning procedure to the bitter end, and as well for the sake of proving to Tony that she deserved the title of *fisher-person*, and as well as for the sheer pleasure of having the assembled ranks come to view her and Tony as buddies, as a duo. Tallia's surprise dinner for Tony was a smashing success.

Twenty-four hours later, Tallia was in her cabin getting ready for what she hoped would be another smashing success, when Dorothy was suddenly called away to the phone. When she returned, Dorothy seemed preoccupied.

"Did something happen at home, Dorothy?" Tallia asked as Dorothy finished brushing her hair.

Dorothy hesitated. "I just got some unexpected news from home."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Oh, it's nothing that won't keep until after this brilliant roast of yours," Dorothy said briskly, putting away Tallia's hairbrush. "Come on, your public is waiting for you."

There was indeed a public waiting for Tallia as she entered the main hall and took her place alongside the other presenters in the front row of the group that was now assembled for the festivities. There she watched with bated breath, as one by one, her schoolmates made the evening that had hitherto only been a glimmer in her mind a reality. In the two hours that followed no staff foible was left untoasted, and no staff's posterior was left unroasted. Every personality quirk, from Mr. Murphy's affinity for white pants and shirts that made him look like The Man From Glad, to Kerwin's incessant off-key humming was exposed. Finally, it was Tallia's turn at bat. Greg, who had the dubious distinction of having been coerced by Tallia into acting as M.C. for the evening, made the introduction. "And now, I give you the person who got us all into this, the person who deserves all the adulation, adoration, and litigation that arises from this evening - **MISS TALLIA TAVES!**"

Tallia wheeled up to the front of the room and faced the assembled crowd. "Thanks, Greg - I think!" she chuckled. "And now we come to our last *victim*--I mean, *honouree*--of the evening - our fearless Vice-Principal, **MR. TONY HARRIS!**"

With his usual exuberant energy, Tony bounded up to the front of the room and took his place on the hot seat. "Now, be nice!" he warned, wagging an authoritarian finger at her.

"Me?" Tallia responded in an innocent tone. "Now, would I *ever* say anything up here about you that wasn't nice?"

Tony nodded vigorously. "In a minute!"

The audience laughed, Tallia turned to them and shrugged. "What can I say? The man knows me well." She glanced quickly at her notes, flashed a devious smile at Tony, and began to speak. "Everyone knows that being Vice-Principal involves a very hectic schedule consisting of not only administrative duties, but also involvement in various school committees, such as being an advisor on the Special Projects Committee and, as Editor, being the Chair of the Yearbook Committee. Over this past year, I've noticed that this demanding schedule really takes its toll on poor Mr. Harris. In fact, it seems that there are times when he's so busy that the only time he has to comb his hair is when he's walking down the hallway and he *thinks* nobody else is around."

Several people in the audience started to chuckle. Tony ran his hand across his face in half delighted embarrassment.

"It's actually quite funny to watch him," Tallia went on with a giggle. "He'll very casually turn his head from side to side to make sure nobody's around, then he'll whip his comb out of his back pocket and briskly run it through his hair, and deftly stash it back in his pocket at the first sign of anyone, especially a female, approaching. I've often fought the urge to play hallway monitor and pull him over for carrying a concealed weapon - his comb!"

The crowd burst into laughter and applause, Tony threw his head back and roared with laughter, but Tallia wasn't finished yet. "One of the things I've really enjoyed about being in junior high is working on the yearbook. For a while, I was so into the picture-taking scene that I thought I just might become the world's first famous photographer with CP. Knowing that Mr. Harris was the one person in school who came close to being as much of a shutter-bug as I was, I asked him one day what he thought of my pictures. Ever the positive reinforcer, Mr. Harris told me that I had taken the best pictures he had ever seen of WALLS, FLOORS and CEILINGS! It was this kind of unqualified support from Mr. Harris that made me decide to stick to writing!"

Again, the crowd laughed and applauded. Tallia was in the home-stretch. "But actually, Mr. Harris has had a much more direct and positive influence on my budding career as a writer. It was largely his encouragement that prompted me to try out for the paper this year, and, since then, I've always been able to count on him as an honest critic and supportive sounding-board. And don't worry about me forgetting you when I make it big, Mr. H. As soon as I get my first million-dollar cheque for my first best-selling novel, I'll send you--*a photocopy!*"

There was more laughter and applause as Tony got up, walked over to Tallia, and gave her a hug. Then, turning to the audience, he motioned for silence and said, "I think all we roastees should applaud our roasters, and I think we should give a special hand to Tallia, who masterminded this evening."

Thunderous applause followed, declaring the roast a phenomenal success. After basking in the general adulation, Tallia, flanked by her classmates, retired to a far corner to receive more personal congratulations. Not surprisingly, Connie and Tony were the first in line.

"Well, Tallia, you've done it again!" said Connie. "Tonight was an unqualified success."

Tallia turned to Alex who was sitting beside her and playfully pulled down the rim of his cap. "Well, I could never have done it without my little roasting elves."

"Very good, Tallia," Tony commended her with a smile. "The mark of a true leader is the ability to recognize the people who do the leg work."

"That's right," Alex grinned. "Tallia's the brains of this operation, and I'm the brawn!"

After seeing Connie off and saying goodnight to Tony, Tallia returned to her cabin. She entered to find Jo-Anne already asleep in bed and Dorothy watching over her with tears streaming down her cheeks. Hearing Tallia come in, Dorothy straightened and briskly wiped her eyes. "So Tallia, are you ready for bed?"

"Not until you tell me why you're crying."

"Well, I guess there'll never be a good time to tell you this," Dorothy sighed.

"My husband Ben has just received some very important news and he called this evening to let me know."

"What was the news?'"

Dorothy took a deep breath. "Ben has been transferred to Montreal."

Tallia's heart sank under the shock. "You're moving?"

"I'm afraid so."

"When?"

"The end of August," Dorothy sighed.

Tallia's bottom lip began to quiver. "But I don't want you to go!" she cried.

"Oh, Sweety, I don't want to go either." Dorothy hugged Tallia to her. "But sometimes life just sends us in directions that we wouldn't choose for ourselves."

"But who's going to look after us?"

"I'm sure they'll find a wonderful replacement--you'll see," comforted Dorothy, who chattered about other matters as she helped Tallia get ready for bed.

For the next two hours, Tallia lay awake trying to keep herself from crying. Finally, she drifted off into a feverish dream of locked rooms and being deserted. Then, all at once, there was a loud knocking at the cabin door. Throwing on her housecoat, Dorothy opened the door. Tony was standing outside. "Dorothy, Dave needs you," he explained rapidly, "It's Alex - he's having trouble breathing."

For the next hour Tallia and Jo-Anne lay motionless and terrified, listening to the sound of footsteps running between cabins. Then came the sound of a van or a bus being loaded, and then, nothing.

* * *

Tallia slipped away from the main lodge and drove down the trail to the dock, her mind still reeling from the events of the last twelve hours. Last evening, she had been wrapped in the warmth and security of an unbroken circle of friendship, revelling in her moment of triumph. But, in the space of twelve hours, two enormous holes had been torn in that security blanket, leaving her vulnerable and cold. Alex was in the hospital with borderline pneumonia; Dorothy was moving away; and life would never be the same again. Like the rain from the cloudburst that first turned happiness to fear, the tears that now filled Tallia's eyes obliterated her vision, preventing her from seeing Tony as he approached her.

"I looked around the hall after I talked to Kerwin and you weren't there," he said quietly.

"I just couldn't take any more of the staff trying to convince us that everything's going to be alright when they know it won't," Tallia blurted out. "Alex is just like that guy, Adam, who was a year ahead of us. When he started Grade Seven, he got a cold, kept getting sicker and sicker, wound up in a hospital, and died. The juniors and seniors went to his funeral and had a memorial for him at school, but the students in elementary didn't go and no one ever really talked about it because everybody thought we were too young to handle it. But our class ended up getting special permission to go because we were in classes with him." She turned to Tony with a hard look of despair. "Alex is going to die too, isn't he?"

"The doctors say that there's every expectation that he'll come through just fine," Tony said reassuringly.

"Until the next time," scoffed Tallia. "There'll always be a next time, won't there?--Until there's a last time." Her mouth began to quiver. "Alex, Zachary, Greg, they all have that wretched disease. Sooner or later, I'm going to lose them all."

"I'm not going to lie to you, Tallia. MD is a vicious disease - most of the boys who have it die before they reach twenty," Tony said in a low voice. "But Alex, Zachary, and Greg, they're fighters, just like you are. I know they're going to fight for every minute they can get. And in the end, Tallia, it's not how much time we have that counts, it's whether or not we make the most of the time we've been given."

Tallia stared off into the morning mist rising from the lake. She spoke in a quiet voice that seemed almost detached. "Alex is sick, Dorothy is moving away... Is this how it's going to be from now on? Am I going to spend the rest of my life worrying about who I'm going to lose next?"

"I think that's a worry we all have to live with," said Tony. "But as time goes on, we learn that there are some people who become so much a part of who we are that we can never really lose them. And, in a strange kind of way, that lurking fear that you'll be physically separated from them someday just makes you more determined to make the most of every moment you have with them. You'll understand what I mean more as you get older."

Tallia sighed. "Funny--I can't imagine ever feeling any older than I do right now."

CHAPTER THREE - WHO INVITED *HER*?

Tallia wheeled backwards into the Handi-Van and was surprised to hear Jo-Anne's voice behind her. "Greetings, fellow grade-eighter and independent traveller."

In an extraordinary and sacrificial demonstration of friendship, Tallia decided to forgo the smoother-riding front wheelchair-stall so that she could sit beside Jo-Anne in the back of the van. "So you finally convinced your folks that it was time to say adios to your school bus days and become transportationally independent, did you?" smiled Tallia. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks." Jo-Anne returned the smile. "It really helped having you to throw at them as an example. You know--*Tallia* took Handi-Van all last year, and *she* didn't drop off the face of the planet."

"Glad I came in handy. So, when did the big breakthrough finally happen?"

"Thursday. I tried to call you but I guess you guys weren't home yet."

"Nah, we were still off in the Rockies doing the family vacation thing," Tallia sighed, rolling her eyes.

"You say that like it wasn't the time of your life!" Jo-Anne responded with affected shock.

"Yeah, right. Two whole weeks cooped up in a trailer with my family, listening to Pop and Travis bicker over which campsite to stay at - *not* my idea of a good time!" She heaved a great sigh. "I even missed saying goodbye to Dorothy."

"Yeah, I know," said Jo-Anne. "Dorothy stopped by to see me for a few minutes the day before she left. She said she felt bad because she tried to call you but you guys had already taken off."

"Figures," muttered Tallia. "Did Dorothy know anything more about who's replacing her?"

"Just her name - Andrea Hagarth."

Tallia wrinkled her forehead. "Dorothy never met her, then?"

"No. But Dorothy was sure she'd be really good."

"Well, for our sake, I hope Dorothy's right."

Tallia and Jo-Anne entered the waiting area of the entrance where they were met by a stocky woman whose narrow face was half hidden behind an enormous clipboard. Her narrow eyes darted up in a momentary glance of acknowledgement before turning back down to the clipboard. "And you are?" she asked in an official tone that bordered on military gruffness.

Unaccustomed to such an abrupt greeting, Tallia and Jo-Anne needed several moments to recover command of their impaired speech.

"T-T-Ta-llia Taves."

"And you're?"

"Jo ... Anne ... Hanson."

The great clipboard was consulted and names were checked off. "Mrs. Tanner's class ... You're mine." She murmured the verdict, putting aside the clipboard.

Tallia and Jo-Anne weren't at all sure they appreciated being appropriated in this manner.

"I'm Andrea Hagarth, your new nurse," she said with the momentary flash of a businesslike smile.

Tallia's heart sank. This woman was *no Dorothy.*

"Now, come over here by the wall, Jo-Anne, and I'll help you take your jacket off," said Andrea. "Tallia, you start to work on your jacket."

Work on my jacket? Tallia thought with a grimace. *What's there to work on? I can get the zipper undone, but that's all. Oh well, that must be what she wants me to do, so I'll do it. No point in getting off to a bad start...*

Emerging from the coat-room, Andrea walked over to Tallia and frowned at her. "Tallia, I thought I asked you to start taking your jacket off."

Tallia was dumbfounded. "I--I took off my seatbelt and undid the zipper-- That's all I can do."

"Really? And when was the last time you *tried* to do more?"

Tallia was gradually coming to realize the horrible truth; Andrea wasn't just *different* from Dorothy, she was the *Anti-Dorothy!* All she could do was stare blankly at this nightmarishly strange woman, who took her silence as an affirmation of her suspicion that Tallia had not recently, if ever, been pushed beyond the bounds of what she *thought* she could do. This was *bad* treatment procedure. "That's what I thought," she declared in an authoritative tone. "One thing you might as well learn about me right off the bat, Tallia - I expect my patients to do as much for themselves as they possibly can. I won't tolerate any less. Remember that, and we'll get along just fine."

As far as Tallia was concerned, the prospects of her *getting along* with this woman were getting slimmer by the moment. Paralysing shock gradually gave way to an impetuous desire to stand up, figuratively of course, for herself. "Bu--but you helped Jo-Anne take off *her* jacket," came the tentative but fiercely-felt challenge.

In a moment of weakness, Andrea allowed a flash of anger to dart from her eyes to Tallia's. Instantly regaining her customary control, she calmly met Tallia's impertinent challenge. "It's obvious from looking at Jo-Anne that she's completely spastic, and therefore has virtually no fine motor control at all; you, on the other hand, clearly have more athetosis than spasticity in your upper body, so there should be no reason you can't take your own jacket off. Just reach back, take hold of the collar, pull it over your head, and then slide your arms out of the sleeves."

This sounded like an unnecessarily long and painful procedure to Tallia. If that weren't bad enough, she was sure that the procedure described by Andrea would only mess up her clothes and hair. No red-blooded teenager would stand for that. "But it won't work. I'm not that coordinated," she argued. "It'll take forever, and all I'll end up doing is getting all hot and messing up my hair."

"That's why I've found that people in your position are better off sticking with short hair - it's much easier to keep groomed," said Andrea. "Now, if you're really worried about how long it will take, I suggest you stop arguing with me and start *trying*, because I'm not giving you any help until you do."

At a total loss for any way to defend her position further, Tallia acquiesced. She grudgingly reached her left arm up over her head and struggled to grab hold of her jacket collar. As she blindly groped for the midsection of the collar, a violent spasm seized her arm, causing it first to tremble uncontrollably and then to lock in excruciatingly painful rigidity. Sensing that it would be pointless to call Andrea's attention to the very real pain that her little lesson in independence was causing, Tallia continued to struggle against the spasm, and was finally rewarded with a semi-firm grip on the midsection of the jacket. Every ounce of her strength was now exerted to pull the jacket inch by inch over her head. It was an arduous fifteen-minute procedure during which she could feel large drops of sweat breaking out from every pore in her body. At the ten-minute mark, she had managed to pull the jacket up to the point where it completely covered her face. For the next five minutes she struggled to free herself from this realm of suffocating darkness. Around her, she could here the muffled sounds of students coming in and being greeted by members of the nursing staff, who readily provided assistance with everything from taking their jackets off, to transferring them from manual wheelchairs into electrics. None of them seemed to even notice her plight; the only acknowledgement she *did* receive was from a little girl in Grade One, who laughingly remarked to her friend as they sped past Tallia in their little electric wheelchairs, "Look at that girl, Jen. She must be playing peekaboo with that nurse."

The little girl's lighthearted remark further aroused the feelings of embarrassment and resentment that were bubbling up inside Tallia. In a burst of angry energy, she yanked the remainder of the jacket up off of her head. She emerged from her nylon prison with aching arms, dishevelled hair, and a face doubly reddened by anger and physical exertion. Panting heavily, she glared coldly and silently at Andrea, who now took her jacket from her lap and refastened her seatbelt with a self-satisfied smile. "See there now - you *can* do it. All you have to do is put your mind to it."

A quick glance at a nearby clock provided the jolt that broke through the pummelling paralysis of silent shock and revived Tallia's powers of speech. "It's ten to nine already! I've only got ten minutes to get to class!" she exclaimed in an accusatory tone.

"Well then, I guess you'd better speed it up next time, hadn't you?" Andrea said coolly.

With an indignant sigh, Tallia turned to leave, but was compelled to stop in mid-turn by the grating sound of Andrea's voice. "And remember, Tallia, I *don't tolerate* lateness, so you'd best make sure you're *on time* for lunch."

Giving Andrea no more than an acknowledging grunt, Tallia cranked her chair up to full speed and fled the scene of her humiliating ordeal. She raced to the double elevators, eagerly anticipating Jo-Anne's righteous indignation at witnessing such unjust treatment of her best friend. But when she got to the double elevators, Jo-Anne was nowhere in sight. Anger was now aggravated by the sharp pain of desertion. Fuming, smarting, Tallia commandeered the next available elevator, went upstairs, and sped, tunnel-visioned to Mrs. Tanner's classroom. Carelessly ramming the classroom door open with her foot-pedal, Tallia found Jo-Anne engaged in comfortable conversation with Zachary and Greg.

"OOH! Looks like somebody's not a Happy Little Grade Eight Camper!" Zachary sardonically acknowledged Tallia's dramatic entrance.

Ignoring Zachary, Tallia drove directly over to Jo-Anne. "What's the idea, taking off and leaving me with that witch?" she demanded angrily.

Conveniently, Jo-Anne's impaired speech momentarily failed her, giving her added time to come up with a suitable response. "W-Well, I *did* wait around until you almost had your jacket off," she explained quickly. "But then, I saw how late it already was, so I thought the most useful thing I could do would be to come up here so that I could explain where you were if Mrs. Tanner came in." She looked plaintively at her still sullen friend. "I'm sorry, Tallia, I didn't mean to take off on you. I just didn't know what else to do."

Tallia heaved a great sigh as she reluctantly allowed her anger towards Jo-Anne to melt away. "It's okay, Jo, don't worry about it. You're right, it's not like you could have done anything about what was going on. I'm sorry - I shouldn't have started in on you like that. It's just that this Andrea person really gets to me. Who invited *her*?"

"Beats me!" declared Jo-Anne.

Tallia shook her head. "I should have known we were in for trouble when you told me her name. The first three letters in Hagarth spell **HAG**!"

Jo-Anne nodded. "Yeah. She would have to be a hag to make you take your jacket off by yourself."

Zachary let out an ironic laugh. "Sounds like you're lucky she didn't say, *Take up thy chair and walk!*"

Tallia rolled her eyes. "Don't laugh - *that's* probably next!"

Assuming his favourite journalist's stance, his head leaned slightly to one side denoting his thorough absorption in analytical thought, Greg declared decisively, "That's just what this place needed - *Attila the Nurse!*"

Tallia eagerly joined her fellow-journalist in the nasty name game. "Also known as Hagarth the Horrible!" But the situation was too immediate and too depressing for the ironic distance to be maintained. Tallia, therefore, tried to take comfort in the fact that Andrea's reign of terror would not be universal. "At least you guys won't have to deal with her much as long as Dave's around."

"Good thing too," said Greg. "I mean, Zack and I would probably just let whatever crap she gives us roll off our backs, but Alex can be pretty sensitive."

"Yeah, Nazi Nurse is the last thing he needs to deal with right now!" Zachary agreed.

Here was a less selfish reason for Tallia to be fretful. "Have you guys seen him lately? How's he doing?"

"I went to see him last week," Greg replied. "It was kind of freaky - it's obvious that he's still really weak, but he's tearing around, trying to make like he's *super-crip*! All he could talk about was running for S.U. Sports Rep."

Tallia frowned. "Do you think that's a good move? Sports Rep involves a lot of long hours. You've got to be in on organizing the whole floor hockey season, plus all the annual stuff like Swim Day and Field Day. Do you think he's up for all that?"

"Not on your life!" Greg declared emphatically. "He'll be lucky if he can handle just coming to school. But try telling him that - he's convinced he's Captain Invincible!"

Further discussion of Alex was abruptly curtailed by his entrance. Tallia couldn't help shuddering at his appearance. Thin to begin with, his further loss of weight made him look utterly emaciated. His face was ghostly pale, but his dark eyes flashed lively defiance. "Well, fellow-grade-eighters, are we all ready to sweep the S.U. elections again?"

Greg smiled uneasily. "And just what makes you so sure of this supposed sweep, Mr. Ultra-Confident?"

"Well, it's a cinch that you and Tallia will get on the paper again; Zack's probably going to be unopposed when he runs for Junior V.P.; Jo-Anne said she'd run for Social Convener, and me, well, I've decided I'm going to be Sports Rep, so you guys can just sit back and watch my dust!"

Uneasy glances darted between the other four. Jo-Anne, usually a follower rather than a leader, recognized an opening and stepped uncomfortably into it, for Alex's sake. "Actually, Alex, I don't think I'm going to run for Social Convener after all," she came in quickly. "This Students' Union stuff is over-rated. If everything runs smoothly, no one ever notices that you're involved. But as soon as something goes wrong, everybody's on your back."

"She's got a point," Greg agreed. "Maybe you should just skip this Sports Rep thing. It could just end up being more hassle than it's worth."

"But I really wanted to run for Sports Rep," maintained Alex. "I've got some good ideas that I think would really shape up the sports program."

Tallia frowned as she tried to come up with a way to resolve the situation without making Alex feel like they were all going *parental* on him. "You know, I've often wondered why we don't have a Sports Committee instead of just one Sports Rep."

Greg was quick to recognize the direction that Tallia was heading in and eager to help her along. "Yeah, we have the Social Committee under the Social

Convener. It would only make sense to have the Sports Rep backed up by a Sports Committee. Everybody always said it's an awfully big job for one person."

"I suppose," Alex drawled, sceptical of this radical new idea that power could rest anywhere other than at the top of the heap.

"Just think, Alex," Greg said in a low, important voice. "If you were to put forward the idea of forming a Sports Committee and then volunteer to be the first serving member, you'd go down in the annals of Inglewood history!"

"And after pulling *that* off, you'd have the whole committee eating out of your hands," Tallia put in quickly. "Any idea you came up with would probably be an automatic go."

"You'd have the perfect set up," declared Jo-Anne. "You'd have the power without the headaches - it'd be great!"

Alex was slowly beginning to give way to the overwhelming determination of his classmates. But still, doubts remained. "Suppose the others don't go for it?"

"What's not to go for?" said Greg. "Most of 'em are always harping about getting more people involved in the Students' Union and that's exactly what a Sports Committee will do."

"Besides, how can you go wrong with all of us backing you up!" proclaimed Tallia.

At last, Alex acquiesced. "Okay, okay, you guys win. I'll float the idea of a Sports Committee and then put myself forward as its first member."

The crisis having been averted just as Mrs. Tanner appeared in the classroom doorway, the five students settled back into the routine of school at Inglewood. Timetables were handed out, therapies were scheduled, and course options were discussed. Mrs. Tanner's announcement that she would be teaching an optional Creative Writing course was enough to make Tallia temporarily forget her anger and apprehension about Andrea and rekindle her excitement about the potential of the new school year. By the time Mrs. Tanner dismissed the class for lunch, Tallia was too engrossed in putting the finishing touches on her paragraph for the Special Projects Committee to pay much attention to Jo-Anne's urgent, "Come on, Tallia, we don't wanna be late." Dismissing Jo-Anne with a "Yeah, I'll be right there," Tallia continued typing frantically for another five minutes. By the time she reached the double elevators which marked the halfway mark between Mrs. Tanner's classroom and the students' lunchroom, the large wall-clock read 11:40 - she was already ten minutes late. Speeding round the corner, she, almost literally, ran into Tony Harris, who was heading towards his office.

"Hey there, Tallia. How was your summer?" he greeted her with a warm smile.

"Short!" Tallia grinned back. "How was yours?"

"Seems to get shorter every year!" declared Tony. "I must be getting *old*!"

"You're not *getting old*," Tallia assured him with a sly smile. "You *are old*!"

"Thanks a lot!" Tony laughed as he gave Tallia a playful punch in the arm. "Say, Tallia, I know you're on your way to lunch right now, but can you stop by my office for a minute? There's something I need to discuss with you."

Tallia looked at her watch; it was 11:42. To delay her appearance in the student lunchroom any longer would surely be considered by Andrea as an act of out-and-out defiance, warranting the most dire of consequences. And yet, here was Mr. Harris, her mentor, wanting to talk to her about something that was, from the gleam in his eye, obviously very important. The decision was made instantly. "I wasn't in any great hurry to sit down to today's mystery-meat anyway," she declared with a chuckle. "Let's head to your office."

Located just a little ways down the hall, Tony's office, with its thick-curtained glass wall opposite to a large window overlooking the school courtyard and filled by a large desk, several comfy chairs, and a huge oak bookcase, had never held a hint of the dread for Tallia that the Vice-Principal's office usually holds for most students. In fact, Tallia had long considered Tony's office the warmest, safest, most commodious room in the entire school, with the exception of the library. As Tony closed the door behind her, Tallia, for the first time that day, felt totally out of the reach of Andrea's ominous presence. Forgoing his official seat behind the great oak-panelled desk, Tony plopped down in a chair beside Tallia and eyed her with a knowing gaze.

"Okay, you got me curious," Tallia said with a little laugh. "What's up?"

"Well, Sam Maxwell and I had a meeting this morning about revamping the Education Department Newsletter."

"And what brilliant ideas did you and our esteemed Principal come up with?"

"For one thing, we decided that we need to get more student involvement with the Newsletter."

Tallia was slowly beginning to catch a glimpse of where this conversation might be heading, and the realization thrilled and terrified her at the same time. Attempting to put on a poker face, she casually asked, "And how do you figure on doing that?"

Tony reciprocated Tallia's attempt at nonchalance with an attempt to suppress his consequent amusement. "Well, we thought we'd introduce a regular student column."

Tallia now decided that it was time to get down to the nitty-gritty - without tipping her hand, of course. "So how exactly would this column work? I mean, would it be just one person writing it all the time, or would you have people trading off?"

"Sam and I talked quite a lot about that," said Tony. "We decided that it would be better, for the sake of continuity, to have one main writer in charge of the column, and to give that person the option of finding other people to make occasional contributions."

Electrical impulses were now coursing through Tallia's limbs at such a rate that she had to grab hold of her armrests and brace her feet beneath her foot-pedals to prevent her limbs from flying out in uncontrollable spasm. She now knew full well what Tony was leading up to, and yet part of her still refused to take anything for granted. "So ... did you guys have anyone specific in mind for this column?" she asked, involuntarily breaking into half a grin.

Tony's eyes twinkled deviously. "As a matter of fact, we do."

Tallia could not believe that Tony wasn't letting her off the hook. She shook her head and gave a little chuckle. "Well, is it anyone I know?"

"Probably."

"Ok-a-ay," Tallia drawled with a laugh. "So, if I actually *do* know this person, how *well* do I know her, him, or it?"

"Well, that depends," Tony grinned as he put his hand on her shoulder. "Just how well dost thou know thyself?"

Tallia threw her head back and laughed. "You couldn't just come out and *tell me* that you want me to write this column, could you?"

"Well, I suppose I *could have* done it that way. But it wouldn't have been half as much fun!"

Tallia suddenly became quiet and thoughtful. "You really want *me* to write this column?"

"Absolutely."

"But why *me* instead of one of the seniors?"

"Because it's obvious that *you're* the most journalistically talented student in this school."

There was just one apprehension keeping Tallia from being swept away by all this adulation from Tony. "So, if I do this newsletter column, will it put me out of the running for the Insider?" she asked reluctantly.

"Absolutely not!" Tony declared decisively. "With your talent we'd be fools not to get all the work out of you that we can."

A wave of exhilarating joy swept through Tallia's heart as she was suddenly overwhelmed by what she knew was Tony's genuine faith in her. Following on its heels however was a vaguely disquieting sense that she had become the object of very high expectations. "A newsletter column *and* the Insider," she said contemplatively. "Sounds like an awful lot of responsibility."

"It is," Tony replied soberly. He put his hand on hers as it lay on the armrest. "But I wouldn't be asking you to take it on if I didn't *know* you could handle it."

Tallia smiled as she turned over her hand and curled her fingers around his. "Well then, I guess you've got yourself a columnist."

"That's my Tallia," Tony grinned, giving her hand a squeeze before releasing it. He looked at his watch and let out a little gasp. "My gosh!--It's already eleven-fifty-two! You'd better get going, young lady, or you'll miss lunch altogether!"

With a jolt, Tallia was reminded of Andrea and the wrath that she was no doubt preparing to pour upon her as soon as she entered the lunchroom. "Oh man! Attila's gonna kill me!"

"Attila?" Tony echoed with a little chuckle as he got up to open the door.

"Andrea Hagarth, our new nurse. Seems she does a terrific impression of Hagar the Horrible a.k.a. Attila the Nurse!" explained Tallia, switching on her chair and turning around.

"Oh dear! That doesn't sound very promising, does it!"

"No, not at all!"

"Well, it's probably just that she needs a little breaking in," Tony said with a reassuring smile. "And if that's the case, my money's on you."

"Thanks," Tallia grinned as she wheeled through the doorway. "See you at the assembly this afternoon?"

"Of course! I wouldn't ever miss announcing my favourite student's appointment to the school newspaper!"

Tallia wheeled down the hall to the lunchroom, hardly conscious of her wheels touching the floor. Of course, she sensed that she had a very angry reception from Andrea waiting for her, but what did it really matter? *She* was Mr. Harris' *favourite student*, and he had so much faith in her talent as a writer that he'd just given her her own column in the Newsletter. She couldn't imagine Andrea being able to do anything to spoil her good mood. Hence, it was with an air of quiet confidence that she entered the lunchroom and took her place at the table beside Andrea, who was just giving Jo-Anne her last mouthful of soup.

Andrea turned abruptly and glared icily at Tallia. "Where have you been?" she demanded angrily.

"Sorry, I'm late," Tallia replied calmly. "I had to finish up some work in the classroom, and then, on the way here, I ran into Mr. Harris, and he really needed to talk to me about something, so I had to spend a few minutes with him."

"And just what would the *Vice-Principal* need to talk to *you* about that was *so important* that it didn't matter that you were *twenty-five minutes late* for lunch?" Andrea sneered sarcastically.

Tallia suddenly felt herself in a bind. She could sense from Andrea's snideness that if she explained to her about Mr. Harris' approaching her to write a column for the Education Department Newsletter, Andrea would only accuse her of shameless bragging. Yet, she felt a powerful urge to prove to Andrea that it wasn't at all so extraordinary for Mr. Harris to want to talk to her about her writing. As Mr. Harris said, Andrea needed some breaking in, and Tallia felt strongly that that should include being made to understand that Mr. Harris was her friend and that he truly respected her talent as a writer.

"Mr. Harris needed to talk to me about some writing projects that he wants me to be involved with this year," Tallia replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I see," Andrea hissed. "And Mr. Harris and these *writing projects* of his were important enough to give you the right to waltz in here *twenty-five minutes* late for lunch and ruin my entire schedule! I'm expected to start toileting girls at exactly twelve o'clock. How do you expect me to feed you lunch in *eight minutes*?"

"I don't."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I'm not hungry. All I want is a glass of milk."

Andrea's mouth tightened and her dark eyes flashed with anger. "I'm afraid it's not that easy," she snapped. "It's my responsibility to oversee your nutrition while you're at school--and, judging from how heavy you look, it's high time *someone* saw to it that you don't skip meals just to fill up on junk food later."

Determined to make up for her perceived desertion that morning, Jo-Anne jumped to Tallia's defense. "But --Tallia--*hardly ever* eats junk food."

Andrea turned abruptly, as if surprised at being challenged from both sides. "Oh, is that so?" she cackled. "You'd never guess that from looking at her waistline!"

Jo-Anne fell silent in defeat, too timid to venture out further in defense of her friend. For her part, Tallia was reeling, having plummeted from the heights of exaltation to the depths of humiliation in the space of three minutes. Yet, she refused to dignify Andrea's vicious personal attack with a direct response. Instead, she decided to use Andrea's apparent obsession with maintaining an orderly schedule to turn the tables on her. "But you said yourself that you won't have time to feed me lunch and be in the bathroom for twelve, so--"

"So you'll just have to wait here until I'm finished in the bathroom and can come back here to feed you," came the placid proclamation from Andrea.

Tallia and Jo-Anne grew wide-eyed. Jo-Anne again felt compelled to come to her best friend's defense. "B-But you can't just leave her sitting here all alone until you're finished," she protested. "It'll be at least half an hour before you're finished in the bathroom; by the time you get back here, feed Tallia, and take her to the bathroom, noon-hour will be over."

Andrea pursed her lips. "Well then, I guess *you'll* just have to stay here with Tallia until I come back, feed her, and then I can take you both to the bathroom," she announced with authoritarian assuredness.

The injustice that the girls were suffering at Andrea's hands was great, yet, her ability to intimidate them was even greater. Consequently, the two sat in sullen silence until Andrea left to start taking the other girls to the bathroom, with the parting injunction, "If I were you two, I'd make sure I stayed put until I get back."

The common enemy having left, Jo-Anne promptly turned on Tallia. "Well, this is a fine mess *you've* gotten us into!" she declared in her well-practised martyr's tone.

"*Me*?" Tallia gaped in offense. "What did *I* do?"

"After this morning, you *knew* she'd be a bear if you were late, and yet you go off and have a heart-to-heart with your pal Tony."

"Like I told *her*, he needed to talk to me about my writing."

"Right! And because of *you*, your *precious Tony*, and your *all-important writing*, *I'm* going to miss the first floor hockey game of the year!"

"Nobody asked you to come riding in and play Great Defender, you know," snapped Tallia.

"Silly me! I have this thing about trying to help out my best friend when she's being dumped on - even if it is partly because she's acting like a knucklehead!"

Tallia could only roll her eyes and shake her head. "Thanks so much!"

Jo-Anne frowned thoughtfully for a moment. "Maybe you could put *your pal Tony* to good use for once and get *him* to get rid of Attila."

"It doesn't work that way around here, you know that," Tallia said dismissively. "It's only teachers who answer to the Principal and Vice; the only person nurses have to answer to is the Head Nurse. Besides, the only way we could nail her is if she didn't do her job--"

"Miss Clipboard-and-Schedule? Not likely!"

"Exactly."

"So what are we gonna do?"

"We'll just have to beat her at her own game," Tallia said thoughtfully.

"And how do we do that?"

"Well, it seems that Andrea's big thing is playing the bully. And what's the worst thing you can do to a bully?"

Jo-Anne shrugged.

"Ignore her!"

"You're going to *ignore* having to take your own coat off and being force-fed lunch after wasting your whole noon-hour?" scoffed Jo-Anne.

"Andrea seems to be testing out some sort of warped behaviour modification technique on me," Tallia explained. "But once she sees that my behaviour isn't being modified, she's going to have to change her technique--"

"Yeah, to something *worse*!"

"But she knows there's a line she can't cross over, or I can nail her for not doing her job," said Tallia. "This is all about Andrea trying to break me and reform me into some sort of perfect little crip mould; well, she's gonna learn that I don't break easy!"

Jo-Anne bit her lip nervously. "I hope you know what you're doing!"

Upon her return, Andrea briskly tied a terrycloth bib around Tallia's neck and began to feed her a sandwich. After taking a token two bites, Tallia called Andrea's attention to the clock on the nearby wall. "You know, it's already twenty to one. I think you'd better start taking us to the bathroom. You wouldn't want us to get in trouble for coming late to the Assembly and having to explain why we're late."

Andrea raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "You wouldn't be trying to intimidate me or anything as *foolish* as that, would you?"

"Of course not," Tallia insisted coyly. "I just figured you wouldn't want me to upset the teachers by being late for the assembly the way I upset you by being late for lunch."

Andrea disdainfully tossed the remainder of the sandwich back onto the plate. "Fine," she hissed. "Just don't be expecting a snack at recess."

* * *

"Is it recess already?" Connie smiled from behind the enormous stack of books on her desk. "I'd have thought you'd still be at your *coronation*."

"Har, har, very funny!" Tallia laughed. "*Court* got out early because His Highness, Principal Maxwell, had laryngitis and hence had to curtail his customary ramblings on the rewards of educational pursuits."

"But Tony was in good voice when he announced your appointment to the Insider, wasn't he?" Connie asked with a sly smile.

"Yeah, yeah," Tallia responded to Connie's teasing a little sheepishly. "It was his *other* announcement that threw me."

"What other announcement?"

"He announced to the *entire assembly* that *I* would be writing a column for the Education Department Newsletter!" Tallia proclaimed in a tone of amazement.

"Didn't he talk to you about writing the column before-hand?"

"Of course he did. I just didn't expect the big public build-up: And along with continuing her *excellent* work on the Insider, Tallia will be writing *her own* *exciting column* for the Education Department Newsletter!" Tallia attempted to convey Tony's overwhelming enthusiasm by speaking as rapidly as she could and flailing her arms about wildly.

Connie laughed and shook her head. "He's very excited about your writing. He really thinks it can take you a long way."

"I know," sighed Tallia. "He's got such high expectations! What if I can't live up to them? What if I just end up letting him down?"

Connie put aside the book she was working on and looked directly at Tallia. "Come on now, Tallia, what did you spend all summer doing?"

Tallia rolled her eyes, realizing that she had just brought on herself one of Connie's famous pep-talks. "Writing."

"And Spring Break, last year?"

"The same thing.--"

"And you showed Tony some of your work, didn't you?"

"Yeah, the stuff I did last year."

"And what did he think of it?"

Tallia wriggled uncomfortably in her chair. "He said it was really good."

Connie slapped her hand on her knee. "What a coincidence! That's *exactly* what *I* thought of it! Just like the work you showed me last month, and last week..."

"Okay, okay, I get the point!" Tallia proclaimed with a chuckle.

"Well, just let me drive it home for good measure," Connie smirked. "Do you *really think* that Tony would go out on a limb by suggesting that you write this column if he wasn't *absolutely certain* that you could handle it?"

Tallia let out a heavy sigh and smiled in spite of herself. "I guess not."

"So there's really no need for all this anxiety, is there?"

"Not about the column, I guess..."

"What? Is something else troubling you?"

Tallia nodded. "Our new nurse. I think she's got it in for me. I don't know why ... It's like, the minute she saw me, she decided that I needed some heavy-duty behaviour modification, and so she decided to make an example of me for everybody else."

"She's probably just mad 'cause you're smarter than she is!" Alex had to raise his weak voice to its full volume so that it could be heard above the whir of his wheelchair as he entered the library.

Tallia let out a laugh. "What is this? First the guy's appointed the founding member of the newly-formed Inglewood Sports Committee, and now he's president of my fan club?"

"Actually, I think Mr. Harris already took that position," chuckled Alex. "So I'll settle for being Vice-President!"

"So, Mr. Vice-President, what can I do you for?" smiled Connie.

"I was wondering if I could get the July and August issues of Motorcycle Magazine and Canadian Sportsweek," said Alex.

"Comin' right up," Connie responded, quickly rising from her chair. She paused to put her hand on Tallia's shoulder. "I wouldn't worry too much about this new nurse of yours, Tallia. She's bound to start getting easier to get along with once she settles in."

Although it rarely happened, Connie was wrong. Rather than becoming easier to get along with as time went on, Andrea remained hostile. As the semester progressed, Andrea's rigidity and harshness became a fact of life for Tallia and Jo-Anne. Typically, it was Tallia who bore the brunt of Andrea's attacks, frequently incurring her wrath by committing such mortal sins as not undoing her seatbelt and pushing up her footplates while she waited for Andrea to transfer her from her wheelchair onto the toilet, arriving two minutes late to get her anti-spasm medication at recess, or spending an inordinate amount of time on the toilet because she was constipated. Tallia would sit through the consequent lectures on her unbelievable irresponsibility and immaturity with the utmost outward contrition while she tuned out the drone of Andrea's voice and rehearsed in her mind Tony's praise of her latest Newsletter article. She had come to view herself as engaged in a battle of wits and wills with Andrea. The irritating incursions made on her limited time by Andrea's frequent object lessons in independence thus became lost time to be shrewdly made up for, obstacles to be mowed through when they could not be circumvented.

Jo-Anne, for her part, remained mostly on the periphery of Andrea's crusade to instill independence. Because she was slightly more physically limited than Tallia and considerably more passive, Andrea did not consider her a sufficient challenge to her skills as a rehab nurse. Therefore, as long as she kept to her prescribed schedule and did not interfere with her efforts to break Tallia of her immature dependence and irresponsibility, Jo-Anne was left pretty much to her own devices. This is not to say that Jo-Anne did not share in the general suffering that accompanied Andrea's oppressive *rule* over *her girls*. Her initial attempts to stand up for Tallia served only to make her a second target for Andrea's wrath. As a result, she soon ceased her attempts to defend her friend, pleading to Tallia her ultimate ineffectuality as an advocate. Even so, there were times when Jo-Anne fell short of the total obedience demanded by Andrea, and therefore found herself to be the recipient of Andrea's stern lectures and harsh punishments. Unlike Tallia, however, Jo-Anne had no special voice of acceptance and affirmation with which to mentally drown out Andrea's abusive tirades. The truth was that, having forgone any involvement in the Students' Union or any other organized activity outside of class, Jo-Anne was becoming increasingly marginalized within the school. She was of above-average intelligence, but she knew that she would never be an *academic star* like Tallia. For the most part, she was satisfied to pass through her classes with as little effort and as much anonymity as possible. Thus, not feeling particularly bound to Inglewood by any academic ambitions or any social ties, except those to Tallia, and being exposed daily to Andrea's doctrine of *rehabilitating the disabled by making them INDEPENDENT* (on *her* terms, that is), Jo-Anne was becoming increasingly restless and preoccupied with thoughts of `getting out`. These thoughts were reinforced in Jo-Anne's mind by the fact that Tallia was, for the most part, too involved in her own struggle to maintain her sense of personal dignity in the face of Andrea's efforts to undermine it to really notice that Jo-Anne was slipping further and further away. It wasn't long before the consuming desire of Jo-Anne's life became to *get out* and thus finally become *normal*.

1980 was drawing to a close. The International Year of Disabled Persons was just around the corner, and it seemed that Inglewood, along with the rest of the world, was standing on the brink of a wonderfully frightening new era. By the time the Christmas season rolled around, a new word had crept into the Inglewood vocabulary - *integration*.

Word leaked out from the December staff meeting to the Students' Union that a few public schools were considering launching pilot programs aimed at integrating physically disabled students into regular schools. As the reporter responsible for covering Current School Issues for the Insider, Tallia was the first in her class to hear the buzzings. The reactions to the news were varied: Zachary was highly sceptical of such a program ever getting approval from the school board; Greg could see some merit in the *idea*--it was about time that disabled students were given the chance to compete academically with so-called "normal" students--but he doubted that there would ever be enough physical supports in place to make it feasible for any but those with the mildest disabilities; Alex, who was again stubbornly battling the onset of a cold, seemed quite alarmed by even the remotest prospect of any of his friends leaving Inglewood; but Jo-Anne enthusiastically embraced the news as her first glimmer of hope for liberation, for finally being *normal*. Jo-Anne's tremendous enthusiasm for the as yet untried concept of integration greatly troubled Tallia who, in all honesty, could not see any real benefits to this integration business. It was not that she didn't want a chance at the kind of fair academic competition with *"normal"* students that Greg talked about, but she believed strongly that her best hope of making the most of such a chance was to remain at Inglewood until she was ready to go to university. That had been her plan since Grade One, and she saw no reason to change it now because of some new social fad. In fact, Tallia would have been happy if the whole integration debate would just fade away so that she and her friends could enjoy the school's Christmas traditions in peace.

But the talk of integration *did not* just fade away. It remained in the forefront of Jo-Anne's mind even as she sat in Mrs. Tanner's classroom before class on the morning of the last day of school before Christmas, helping Tallia make last-minute preparations for the school Christmas party that afternoon. "So did Mr. Hogan say anything more about this integration stuff when you guys went shopping yesterday to get snacks for the party?"

Tallia, who was in the midst of a panic attack for fear that she had forgotten to take care of some major detail, like who was picking up the fried chicken for lunch, was getting a little impatient with Jo-Anne and her one-track mind. "No," she replied briskly. "Why should he?"

"Well, he *is* the Junior-Senior High Program Coordinator. If a new integration program were being planned, he'd probably be the first to hear about it." Jo-Anne explained quickly.

"I suppose," Tallia murmured. She glanced about anxiously. "Have you seen my list of people who are supposed to go around collecting the toys from the Santa's Anonymous boxes?"

"Yeah, it's on your desk, underneath your Language book."

"Oh yeah, thanks," Tallia mumbled, quickly snatching up the paper and studying it.

"Has Mr. Harris said anything to you about it?"

"Santa's Anonymous?"

"No! This integration stuff."

Annoyed, Tallia tossed the piece of paper back onto her desk. "No. Why should he waste his time talking to me about some silly rumour?"

"It's more than a rumour, and it's definitely *not* silly," Jo-Anne insisted fiercely. "It could change *everything* for us!"

"*If* it actually happens, and I still don't think it will, it *might* change *everything* for some ambulatory kid with really mild CP, but not for us," argued Tallia. "No regular school is going to accept students as severely disabled as we are."

Apparently stung hard by Tallia's version of the truth, Jo-Anne decided to sting back. "I thought *you* were the one who was gonna go off to university and become a *big-time writer!* - How are you gonna get into university if you can't even get into a regular school?"

Jo-Anne's words had their desired effect - Tallia was hurt. However, the hurt was dulled considerably by her determination to finish the job at hand and her disinclination toward getting into a major argument with Jo-Anne when she still had so much work to do. "I'm well aware that it's going to be tough. I just figure my best shot at making it to university in the first place is by going through high school here, where I know the teachers are behind me, instead of going out to a regular school where half the teachers would probably resent me because I was forced on them," she said simply.

Jo-Anne gaped at Tallia incredulously. "You're saying that, even if you got the chance to go out to a regular school, you wouldn't go?"

"In all likelihood, no," Tallia stated flatly. She was then suddenly seized by the overwhelming urge to make Jo-Anne feel guilty for being so preoccupied with thoughts of deserting her and their friends. "And frankly, I'm not gonna get all worked up about something that probably won't even happen, when I've got tons of more important stuff to worry about."

"Like what? Getting ready for this silly little Christmas party?" scoffed Jo-Anne.

"No, like whether or not Alex is going to be able to make it to this *silly little Christmas party*," Tallia retorted snidely. "He's been home sick with a cold all week, in case you've forgotten."

Jo-Anne's heart and voice softened as she thought of poor Alex. "Of course, I haven't forgotten," she said quietly. After a long pause, she asked in a tentative voice, "Have you heard anything about how he's doing?"

"No," sighed Tallia. "Greg was going to call him last night to find out how he's doing and whether or not he can make it to the party this afternoon."

"Alex isn't going to make it to the party today, he was admitted to General Hospital late yesterday afternoon," Greg announced soberly as he wheeled into the classroom, followed closely by Zachary.

A familiar lump formed in the pit of Tallia's stomach. Expressions of shock at this point would be incongruous. Ever since Alex got sick at camp, she, like her classmates, had anticipated announcements of this nature. The only thing left to do now was get the facts. "What happened?" she asked somberly.

"His cold kept getting worse, he started having a lot of trouble breathing, so his parents took him to the hospital. They've got him on a ventilator now to help him breathe," Greg reported mechanically.

The four looked at each other in sullen silence. It was Tallia who broke it with the words that the others were too afraid to say. "It doesn't look too good for Alex, does it?"

"Not really," sighed Greg.

"But then, don't forget, Alex is a tough, stubborn little guy," Zachary interjected with forced lightness. "Who knows? He might just fool everybody!"

"It *would* be just like him," Jo-Anne affirmed with a hollow chuckle.

Tallia turned to the window and looked wistfully out at the falling snow. "Do you guys realize that this is the first Christmas since *Kindergarten* that the five of us won't be together?" she said contemplatively. "That's *unreal*!"

Zachary again tried to shrug off the gathering gloom. "Well, there's always next year, I guess."

Jo-Anne could no longer bear to give even her implicit consent to this contrived sense of security. She deeply resented having to confront life and death issues when she knew that the most serious issue faced by her able-bodied, *normal* peers was who to take to the school dance. She thus clung all the more fiercely to her hope of escaping Inglewood and all the *abnormality* it embodied. "I don't think we should go making plans for next Christmas," she said boldly. "I mean, with all the talk of change around here, we don't really know where *any of us* will be next year."

* * *

When the mountain touches the valley,
All the clouds are taught to fly.
Thus our souls shall leave this land
Most peacefully.
Though our minds be filled with questions,
In our hearts, we'll understand
When the River meets the Sea...

This quiet, meditative song from the newly-released Muppet Christmas Album was, to Tallia, the only thing at the Christmas party that reconciled itself to the actual reality of the day. Around her, her schoolmates, even her classmates, were talking, eating, playing games--celebrating the holiday together as a school family the way they had every Christmas for pretty well as far back as she could remember. But Tallia couldn't shake the sinking feeling that Christmas at Inglewood would never be the same again. Already, Alex's illness had caused a break in the circle that might never be mended; and the winds of change that had hitherto taken the form of a gentle breeze that occasionally wafted through the school, breathing new life into it, were now gathering into a raging storm that threatened to blow apart the entire school, and, with it, the lives of the people who grew up in it.

"Hey, Tallia, shouldn't you be having more fun, seeing how you helped organize this party?" Connie gently chided her, joining her in the solitary corner beside the stereo.

Tallia smiled dimly. "I'm sorry, Connie. I guess I'm just not much into the Holiday Spirit."

Connie put an understanding hand on Tallia's shoulder. "I heard about Alex. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, I know," sighed Tallia. "Me too."

"But you know, I think Alex would be really unhappy if he thought he was the reason that you couldn't enjoy the Christmas party," Connie mildly admonished.

"You're right - as usual!" Tallia responded with a weak chuckle. "It's just that these blues are kind of hard to shake."

"What have you ladies got your heads together about?" Tony asked cheerily, walking over to join them.

"It seems that Tallia could use an infusion of Christmas Spirit," Connie replied, patting Tallia on the shoulder.

"I think I might be able to help with that," Tony grinned, taking an envelope out of his suit pocket and holding it out to Tallia. "Santa left this for you."

As she reached out a shaky hand to take the envelope, she caught a familiar gleam in Tony's eyes and knew that he had a scheme afoot. "What is it?" she asked apprehensively.

"Open it and find out," chuckled Tony.

It was a Public School Board envelope, typed-addressed to her in care of the Inglewood Education Department. With Connie's help, she opened the envelope, took out the letter, and began reading it to herself: *Dear Miss Taves: It is my pleasure to inform you that you have been awarded the Public School Board's Outstanding Achievement Award for 1980. Your many contributions to your school community, as detailed by Mr. Tony Harris in his nomination letter, distinguish you as a most worthy recipient. You are hereby cordially invited to our Annual Awards Night at the Civic Auditorium at 7:30 pm on January 12th to receive your award and $250 cash prize ...*

Tallia gaped at Tony as she let the letter fall to her lap.

"Well, what does it say?" Tony asked slyly.

"That you *made* the School Board give me the Special Achievement Award and two hundred and fifty dollars!" Tallia exclaimed breathlessly.

"I hardly had to hold a gun to their heads!" laughed Tony. "I just told them about your talent as a writer and all the contributions you've made to the school, and they took it from there."

Tallia was close to tears. "But why me?" she gulped.

Tony took both her hands firmly in his. "Because I can't think of anyone in this school who deserves it more." He leaned forward and embraced her. "Merry Christmas, my Tallia."

What was this painfully wonderful paradox that she now seemed locked into? Despairing and yet jubilant? Excluded and terrified by what Jo-Anne called the *normal* world, and yet recognized by it? Was this a vindication of her cherished belief that she could conquer the able-bodied world without giving up the security of Inglewood? Or was it a cruel trick played by Fate, a trick aimed at lulling her into a false sense of security just before getting crushed under the boom of relentless, irrevocable change? Did she *really* want to know which it was? *No.* In that bitter-sweet moment as Tony held her, the conflicting emotions raging inside her were put to rest by the message of the Muppet song now playing on the stereo:

It's in every one of us
To be wise.
Find your heart,
Open up both your eyes.
We can all know everything
Without ever knowing *why*.
It's in every one of us
By and by.

CHAPTER FOUR - THE FIRST PARTING

"But Mom, I *still* don't see why I can't wear my pink dress to the awards ceremony tonight."

"It's far too sheer," Anna said firmly. "That auditorium gets terribly drafty." She went back to the closet and pulled out a red velour dress. "How about this one? It would be much warmer."

"It would also make me look like a blimp, and if I drool, even a little bit, it'll spot," complained Tallia. "I've got to wear something that makes me look half decent. Mr. Harris says that there might even be TV news crews at the ceremony."

Travis suddenly appeared in the doorway of Tallia's bedroom. "Mom, I'm gone. If anyone calls, tell them I'll be home at nine, after my shift at the restaurant."

"Wait a minute, Travis," Tallia jumped in. "I thought you were going to take tonight off so that you can come to the awards ceremony."

"Oh, yeah, I guess I forgot to talk to you about that," said Travis. "I decided that I couldn't really afford to take tonight off since I need to take the whole weekend off to study for midterms. So I can't make your awards thing - sorry." Glancing at his watch, he declared, "Twenty to - gotta go. I'll be home to help you frame your piece of paper." And before Tallia could say a word, Travis was gone.

"Oh, this is just *GREAT!*" Tallia burst out in exasperation. "It's not enough that Mr. Harris can't come because he's got some dumb special ed administrators' meeting, now *my brother's* deserting me too!"

"Travis *is not* deserting you, he's just acting responsibly. You should be old enough to understand that," said Anna. "As for Mr. Harris, he's a very busy man - I don't know what put it into your head that he would come in the first place."

"He *is* the one who nominated me for the award in the first place," Tallia snapped defensively. "And he's sure more excited about the award than you and Pop seem to be."

"Tallia, you know that your father and I are happy about your award. We're just not ones to get too carried away by things like this. You're still going to have a very long, tough row to hoe just to finish high school, no matter how many awards you get."

"Well, gee Mom, thanks for the *overwhelming* support."

"Your father and I *do* support you in every way we can," Anna maintained, her voice becoming distinctly martyrish.

Tallia sighed. "Yeah, I know--"

"It's not that I don't want you to enjoy this award, I just don't think you should get too carried away by all this attention - it'll just make it a bigger let-down for you when things get back to normal."

"Whatever," murmured Tallia.

Tallia was relieved not to find Jo-Anne waiting for her in the Handi-Van that morning. The constant juggling of bus runs was making their rides to school together less and less frequent. Truth be told, Tallia wasn't really disappointed by this separation. Jo-Anne's general sullenness and her steadily increasing restlessness at Inglewood were causing an ever-widening rift between them. They hardly ever really talked anymore, and the few serious discussions they did attempt usually ended in argument. The tension of a half-hour bus ride with Jo-Anne would have been the last thing she needed this morning, after the *little talk* that her mother had given her. Her family's general blasé attitude toward her accomplishments as a writer was a fact of life that she had pretty much gotten used to, but her mother's insinuation that her wanting Tony Harris to be at the ceremony was somehow out of line was just too much. Even after all the stories that Tallia had told her about how much Mr. Harris really believed in her talent as a writer, it was as though her mother thought that all he was doing in encouraging Tallia was his job. In fact, her mother probably thought that since this awards ceremony was after working hours, Mr. Harris probably had no interest in coming. But Tallia *knew* that wasn't so. Mr. Harris' excitement over this award was genuine, just as his faith in her as a writer was. If only he didn't have that stupid meeting tonight, she *knew* he would be there at the ceremony.

It was now part of Tallia's general strategy for coping with Andrea to try to get to school early so that she could get Dave to take her jacket off before Andrea came down to the bus entrance. Much to Tallia's relief, this was one day when her strategy worked. It was finally beginning to feel a little more like *her day*.

Wheeling out of the elevator on the yet peaceful and deserted second floor, Tallia met Tony, who greeted her with a warm smile. "So how's my favourite student feeling on the morning of her big day?"

"Nauseated!"

"Come on, Tallia, you can't actually be *nervous* about the ceremony tonight!"

Tallia rolled her eyes. "Wanna bet?! Last night, I dreamt that I spazzed out on stage, wiped out the presenter, and went flyin' off the edge of the stage!"

Tony's eyes twinkled with delight as he laughed. "Well then, I guess I'd better sit in the front row just in case you need someone to catch you."

Tallia flashed a look of confusion at Tony. "Bu--but you can't make it. You've got that meeting--"

"Well, that's the nice thing about working with Sam Maxwell," said Tony. "He's the boss, but he's not above filling in for his second-in-command when something *really important* comes up."

Tallia shook her head in delighted amazement. "And this awards thing is *really important*?"

Tony smiled as he took her hand. "Now, what could be more important than being there to lead your standing ovation? Besides being there to catch you in case you should actually do a nose-dive off the stage!"

* * *

"And when I looked back out at the audience, I actually saw him stand up and lead the ovation!" Tallia was still so enthralled by the events of the night before that she forgot her now standard practice of exercising reserve when talking to Jo-Anne about Mr. Harris. "And then, after the ceremony was over, he came over and introduced me to the Chair of the School Board as Inglewood's Writer-in-Residence. But what *really* blew me away was when he told my parents how proud he was of me, and that they should be very proud of me too! Maybe now they'll finally catch on to the fact that Mr. Harris *really does* believe in me and care about me."

"The way you're going on about Mr. Harris, you'd better watch it, or they'll catch on to the fact that just maybe you care about him a little more than you should," Jo-Anne warned pointedly.

Tallia rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh. "You aren't going to start on *that* kick again, are you?"

"*You're* the one who hasn't been able to talk about anything but *The Wonderful Mr. Harris* all morning," countered Jo-Anne. "For someone who swears up and down that she doesn't have a crush on the guy, you sure make a big deal about all the attention he gives you!"

Before Tallia could respond, Tony came breezing into the classroom. "Good morning, you two," he greeted them cheerily. "So Jo-Anne, has Tallia been regaling you with tales of her triumph?"

"Actually, Tallia's been talking more about *you* than herself," Jo-Anne responded, flashing Tallia a penetrating look.

"What Jo-Anne means is that I was just telling her about the great press you gave me last night with all those big-wigs from the school board," Tallia came in quickly. "You know, if you don't watch it, I'm going to start actually *believing* that stuff and then I'll end up with a swelled head!"

"Or worse!" Jo-Anne muttered under her breath.

"I don't think there's much chance of that," Tony smiled, putting his hand on Tallia's shoulder. "In the first place, everything I told those people about you last night was true. And, in the second place, you're not going to have *time* to get a swelled head because I think I've found your next challenge." He took a piece of paper from the pocket of his suit jacket, unfolded it, and handed it to Tallia, who read it with eager curiosity.

"A national student essay competition." Tallia frowned thoughtfully. "Sounds like pretty serious stuff."

"Oh, it's big-time all right," nodded Tony. "But I think you're ready for it."

"What would I enter?" Tallia asked in a contemplative tone.

"Well, I was thinking maybe you could expand that last Newsletter article on the International Year of Disabled Persons," said Tony.

Tallia suddenly became hesitant. "According the minimum length on this competition announcement, I'd have to almost double the length of that Newsletter article."

"True, but didn't you tell me that you had gathered enough material to write a whole series on I.Y.D.P.?"

"Well, yeah--"

"So take that material and turn it into a full-length essay. I'm sure you could do a really fine job on it."

"But it would take me forever--"

"The deadline's not until the First of March. That gives you six weeks."

"What about writing the article for the February Newsletter?"

"Why don't you ask Greg to fill in for you?"

Tallia smiled and shook her head. "You're going to keep after me until I actually do this, aren't you?"

"Probably!"

"You really think I have a shot?"

"Absolutely," said Tony. "And regardless of the final outcome, I think it'll be good experience for you to enter this competition."

"Will you proofread my rewrites?"

"Of course! Someone's got to watch out for you and your spelling mistakes!" Tony grinned.

"Har, har!"

"So does this mean I've succeeded in convincing you to enter the competition?"

Tallia let out an ironic laugh. "Can you remember ever *not* succeeding in getting me to do something you wanted me to?"

"Come to think of it, no! But that must be because you have such superior judgement!"

"Must be!"

"So can I expect the first draft on my desk on Monday?" Tony asked smugly.

"Don't push your luck!" Tallia warned with a little chuckle. "You'll have it by Friday."

"Well then my work here is done," Tony smiled as he turned to leave.

Tallia called him back in a tentative voice. "Mr. Harris--"

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to say thanks for rearranging things so that you could come to the ceremony last night - it meant a lot."

Tony smiled at her tenderly. "You're welcome. It meant a lot to me too, you know."

"I rest my case!" Jo-Anne declared when Tony had gone.

"What *are* you talking about?" Tallia asked in a slightly irritated tone.

"I just wanted to say *thanks* for rearranging things so that you could come to the ceremony last night - it meant *a lot*." Jo-Anne echoed Tallia's back to her, providing her own provocative emphases.

"So?"

"Why would it *mean so much* to you that he showed up at the ceremony last night, unless you had a major case for the man?"

Tallia threw up her hands in frustration. "Oh, I don't know, Jo, just maybe it could be because it's Mr. Harris who was more enthused about me getting this award than my own family or anybody else around here - even my *so-called* best friend."

Only Jo-Anne's eyes registered the sting of Tallia's words. "And just maybe you're getting all uptight because your *so-called* best friend knows you better than you want her to," she responded with quiet coldness.

* * *

Tallia reworked her article, gave it to Tony to send off to the contest, and then virtually forgot about the whole thing as her attentions quickly returned to the more customary concerns of life at Inglewood - schoolwork, the *Insider*, the Students' Union, and dealing with the ever-present anxiety over what was happening to her youngest classmate.

"The guy's been in the hospital for three months - you'd think that some member of our *devoted staff* would have taken us over to see him at least once," muttered Greg.

"Surely you don't mean our *devoted nursing staff*!" Tallia drawled, amplifying Greg's sarcastic tone. "They've got Dave run so ragged that he doesn't know whether he's coming or going. And as for our beloved Hag Hagarth, she's been far too busy making me spend my noon-hours in the bathroom struggling to do up my own seatbelt to give a thought to poor Alex."

"She's probably just trying to give your life some balance, Tallia. After all, *somebody* has to make sure being *Teacher Tony's Pet* doesn't give you *too* much of a swelled head," needled Greg.

"What a *profound* insight!" sneered Tallia. "It's too bad you can't use that *penetrating mind* of yours to figure out some way for us to get to go see Alex before Spring Break next week."

"Well--maybe it's just as well--" Jo-Anne came in hesitantly. "I mean, last I heard, he was on a ventilator almost all the time. It didn't really sound like he was in great shape for visitors."

"Yeah, you know how sensitive Alex can get about people seeing him sick," Zachary added quickly.

"But we're not just *people*," insisted Tallia. "Besides, I'm afraid that if we wait too long, we'll--miss our chance--"

At that moment, Tony entered the classroom. "Good morning, all. I've got a special delivery letter for one Miss Tallia Taves," he announced cheerily as he crossed the room and stood in front of Tallia.

"When were you demoted to mailman?" Tallia asked with a chuckle.

"Well, this isn't any old letter, it merited special treatment. It's from the National Student Essay Competition," Tony smiled, taking an envelope from the pocket of his suit jacket and holding it out to Tallia.

Tallia sat spellbound, staring first at Tony and then at the letter.

This mystical moment was abruptly interrupted by Greg's pragmatic urging. "Well, what are you waiting for? Aren't you going to take it and read it?"

"Can't--move--too--scared--" Tallia sputtered, panic-stricken.

Tony smiled at her empathetically. "Would you like me to open it and read it aloud for you?"

"Sure--might as well let the cat out of the bag all at once," Tallia agreed hesitantly.

With a reassuringly steady hand, Tony opened the envelope, took out the single-page letter, and began reading. "Dear Miss Taves." He looked up with a mischievous grin. "That's you, Tallia."

"Thanks *so much* for clarifying that!" Tallia exclaimed in exasperation. "Will you please just read the whole stupid letter!"

"All right, if you *insist*," chuckled Tony. "Dear Miss Taves, I am happy to inform you that your essay, *Wheeling Out of the Shadows*, has **won first prize** in our National Student Essay Competition!"

A great *"YES!"* reverberated through the room, echoing from Tallia, to Tony, to Jo-Anne and the boys.

"I don't believe this!" Tallia exclaimed breathlessly. "I *really* won?"

"That's what the man wrote!" Tony declared jubilantly, taking her hand. "Congratulations, Tallia! I *knew* you could do it!"

"Well, there you have it - *super-crip strikes again*!" Greg teased playfully.

"So what exactly does *super-crip* get?" ever-pragmatic Zachary asked.

Tony again looked at the letter. "Well, it says that Tallia's going to get five hundred dollars, and her essay is going to be published, by a Toronto publisher in a book called The National Anthology of Student Writing!" He was now all animated elation. "Tallia, you're about to become *a nationally-published author!* What have you got to say for yourself?"

Tallia could only shake her head in stunned disbelief. "I--I just--*can't*--believe this!"

"Well, I *certainly can!*" Tony beamed as he bent forward to give her a hug. "I *knew* you could do it! I am *so proud* of you!"

"So it looks like Super-Crip has written another page for the Inglewood history books," said Greg.

"Yeah, and since Tallia has made this such a momentous day in Inglewood school history, I think today should be declared a school holiday," Zachary put in with a sly grin.

"Well, I don't know if I'd go *that* far," chuckled Tony. "But I do agree that Tallia's triumph calls for special recognition. So, by the authority invested in me as Vice-Principal of Inglewood, I hereby declare this to be Tallia Taves Day, and grant you, Tallia, any wish your heart desires - provided, of course, it doesn't involve cutting class!"

Tallia cast a thoughtful glance at Greg before turning back to Tony. "Well okay, would you take us to General Hospital to see Alex at noon? I'd really like to see him."

Tony hesitated. "I don't know, Tallia--Alex is quite sick..."

"I know, that's why I want to see him," Tallia replied soberly. "I want to tell him about winning the competition. I think he should know since he made himself Vice-President of my fan club and all."

"Did he?" Tony smiled gently. "And who's President?"

Tallia chuckled somewhat shyly. "Well, Alex said that you had already taken that position."

"Alex always was a very astute young man," Tony laughed softly.

"I think Alex would be really happy to see us," Tallia said earnestly. "He's been cooped up in that hospital room for so long, he's probably going stir-crazy. It might really do him some good to see the old gang. We've been trying to get someone to take us all over to see him for weeks."

"Well, of course I'd be happy to book the school van and take you all over to the hospital at noon," said Tony. "But we still have a bit of a problem."

"What's that?" asked Tallia.

"Last I heard, Alex is only allowed two visitors at a time and only once in an hour," Tony explained.

"Mr. Harris is right. They'll never let us all in to see Alex," said Greg. "I think it'd be best if just two of us went."

Tallia frowned apprehensively. "But which two?"

"Well--I've never been good at hospitals," Jo-Anne admitted. "It's probably better if I don't go."

"Yeah, and I've been feeling a little run down lately, so maybe it's best if I sit this one out too," said Zachary.

Greg shrugged and turned to Tallia. "Well Tallia, it seems we win by elimination."

"Guess so," sighed Tallia.

"I'll go down right away and see about booking the school van," said Tony. Before turning to leave, he gently patted Tallia's shoulder. "I am *very* proud of you."

"Thanks, Mr. Harris," Tallia smiled softly.

* * *

The wet wheels of Greg and Tallia's chairs squeaked noisily as they followed Tony along the hospital corridor. Coming in from the gloom of the rain outside, Tallia found that her eyes were stung by the harsh reflection of the fluorescent lights off the sterile white walls and freshly waxed floor. The scent and sense of antiseptic, only occasionally noticeable at Inglewood, now filled the entire hallway, making Tallia feel nauseated.

Tony stopped in front of the door of Alex's hospital room. "Well, here we are. I'll just come in and get you two settled and then I'll step out for a while so you can visit with Alex."

Tallia and Greg silently nodded their assent, both too apprehensive about what they would find on the other side of the door to respond verbally. They entered the room and were met by the competing sounds of an oxygen machine, heart monitor and a game show on TV. Tallia followed Tony and Greg to Alex's bedside. What Tallia saw made her shudder. Alex's totally emaciated body lay limp and dwarfed in the enormous hospital bed; every limb attached to tubes or wires.

Suddenly aware of someone's having entered the room, Alex slowly turned his head and gazed dimly at the trio gathered by his bed. His eyes heavy from the pain-killers, it took several moments for the figures to come into focus. The tallest figure was the first he could make out. "Mr. Harris?" he whispered faintly.

"Hi there, Alex," Tony smiled down at him softly. "I brought two of your pals to see you."

Tallia drove up to the bed and put her hand on Alex's hand as it lay limp beside him on the mattress. "Hey, Alex, how's my main man?"

"Still here," Alex smiled weakly. "Stupid drugs--got me all fuzzy ... Is that Greg with you?"

"You bet," Greg announced cheerily as he drove up beside Tallia. "We figured it was about time that somebody came and checked up on you."

"You know, the nurse at the station did say there was a limit of two visitors at a time," said Tony. "So I think I'll get out of the way, let you guys visit for a bit, and come back when it's time to go."

Tallia nodded. "Okay, Mr. Harris - thanks."

Alex's breathing was so shallow that he could only get out one or two words per breath. "I can't--believe--you guys--finally--came.--I was --beginning-- to think -- you'd--forgotten--about--me--all together. --"

"We've been wanting to come see you for a long time now," Tallia assured Alex. "But we couldn't get anyone to take us."

"That's right," Greg affirmed. "As it was, Tallia had to put on her Super-Crip cape and make history just to get Harris to bring us here to see you today."

"What--do you--mean?--" asked Alex.

Determined not to be deprived of the pleasure of telling Alex about winning the essay competition herself, Tallia jumped in. "He means that we just found out that I won first prize in a National Student Essay Competition. My essay's going to be published in an anthology of student writing from all over Canada--"

"And *Teacher Tony* was so proud of *his Pet* that he granted her a wish, so she wished for us to come here and see you." Greg filled in the story for Alex while managing to bait Tallia.

Alex was too excited by the news to notice the sharp look of annoyance that Tallia flashed at Greg. "Way--to go--Tallia!--I--always--*knew*--you could--show--all those--TABs--how to--write?--"

Tallia looked confusedly at Alex. "TABs?"

Alex grinned. "Yeah!--Temporarily--Able--Bodieds! --" His grin disappeared as he suddenly found that he had to stop talking in order to take in oxygen. When he finally began to speak again, his voice was low and important. "You know,--if--you guys--ever really--got--together, --you'd--be a--really--*scary*--team!--"

"Ah, Tallia's the *star!* - I'm just a lowly backup guy playing second fiddle," moped Greg.

"Well, no one's making you *stay* in the background, you know," retorted Tallia. "You could jump out and grab your share of the limelight any time."

A fiercely serious expression came over Alex's face. "I want--you guys--to--promise me--two--things.--"

"What are they?" Greg asked earnestly.

"First,--that--you guys--really--start--sticking--together--as a--team--on the--Students'--Union--and stuff.--There's--too much--really--important--stuff--to--get done--for--you guys--to waste--time--squabbling. --"

A look of mutual understanding and assent passed between Greg and Tallia. "Okay, Alex, you got it," Greg vowed soberly. "What else?"

"The--Sports--Committee.--Find a--replacement --for me--and--make sure--it--keeps going. --"

Tallia gulped as she squeezed Alex's hand. "We'll take care of it - we promise."

For just an instant, Alex seemed to breathe easy. "Thanks.--I knew--you guys--would--come through. --"

Tallia heard the door open behind her as Tony re-entered the room. "Sorry guys, but I think it's time we got going," Tony announced quietly.

Tallia felt a pang. "Already?"

"'Fraid so," Tony said gently. "The nurses don't want us tiring Alex out."

"Mr. Harris is right," Greg agreed. "Besides, we're probably making him miss his favourite soap opera - *As the Stomach Turns*!"

Alex chuckled faintly. "Yeah,--right!--" His face suddenly became serious again. "You guys--*will*--come back--soon--won't you? --"

Tallia nodded as she switched on her wheelchair. "You bet. We'll be back just as soon as we can."

"You can count on it," Greg reassured Alex as he turned to follow Tallia out of the room. "Take it easy, Alex. We'll see you soon."

Thus taking their leave, the trio filed out of the room and made their way down the hall to the elevator.

"We're never going to see Alex again, are we?" Tallia said quietly.

Tony only sighed and patted her shoulder before pressing the down button on the elevator.

* * *

Shaun Murphy stepped up to the speakers' lectern and put a piece of paper on it. Then he looked up and addressed the assembled group. "It's an honour for me to have been asked by two of Alex's closest friends, Greg and Tallia, to read the tribute that they've written for Alex."

Tallia looked over at Greg; he was looking back at her with the same look of worn-out anxiety that she was sure she must have. Though long expected, this first parting from among their class had left them numb.

Presently, Mr. Murphy began reading. "Alex was always a quiet kind of guy. Because he was quiet, and because he was always the youngest in our class, we often acted as though we knew a lot more than he did, and so he should always go along with *our* ideas. The truth was, though, that there were plenty of times when Alex was a whole lot smarter than we were. The last time we went to see Alex in the hospital, it was very important to him that we promise to put aside the little competitive ego trips that we sometimes pull on each other and really start working together as a team for the good of Inglewood. Alex said that there was too much really important stuff to get done for us to waste time bickering over which one of us was the most talented writer, and he was right. He was always deeply concerned about doing whatever he could to make Inglewood a better place for all of us. He was active in the intermural sports program, especially floor hockey. This year, he initiated the formation of the Sports Committee and became its first member. We will all miss Alex very much; he was a good student and a great friend. We can all honour his memory by following his example of dedication and caring."

The school memorial service was over. Now came the part that Tallia had been dreading the most - it had been decided that she should be the one to present Alex's parents with the tribute to Alex that was published in the Insider.

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were standing in the far corner of the room, talking with Mr. Harris. Tallia approached them hesitantly, not having a clue what to say or even how to begin. As if instinctively sensing her distress, Tony began for her. "Tallia, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were just telling me how much they appreciated the tribute that you and Greg wrote for Alex."

"Yes, it was just beautiful, Tallia," said Mrs. Thompson, a stout woman with a kind face. "You and Greg both write so well. Alex admired you both so much - I'm sure he'd be very pleased."

"Thanks, Mrs. Thompson," Tallia said quietly. She shakily removed a large brown envelope from beside her and handed it to Mrs. Thompson. "The class thought you would like to have this. It's the issue of the Insider that had a tribute to Alex that I wrote in it."

"Thank you, Dear." Mrs. Thompson opened the paper to the table of contents and studied it for a moment. "I see there's also an article in here that you won some kind of award for?"

"Yes, Tallia recently won a National Student Writing Competition," explained Tony.

"Alex told us about your winning the competition the day that you, Greg, and Mr. Harris came to visit him," said Mrs. Thompson, looking at her husband for confirmation.

Mr. Thompson nodded and smiled kindly at Tallia. "We hadn't seen him that excited about anything in a long time. He was very proud of you, Tallia."

Tony tenderly put his arm around Tallia's shoulder. "We're *all* very proud of her. With her talent as a writer, she's got a very promising future ahead of her."

Mrs. Thompson took Tallia's hands. "Mr. Harris is right. The finest tribute that you can pay to our Alex is to go out into the world and be a great success," she said in a voice choked with emotion.

Tallia gulped and fought back tears. "I'll try my best - I promise."

CHAPTER FIVE - EVENS AND ODDS

The smell of new books filled the library. Tallia found herself having to negotiate her way around boxes and packages containing a summer's worth of accumulated books and magazines in order to get to Connie's desk. "Where did all this stuff come from? School was only out for two months--this looks like *two years'* worth."

"Well, back in May, Kerwin decided that we could really use some new material." Connie let out a grunt as she lifted another large box of books onto her desk.

"I guess it's true that this place could use some new stuff," said Tallia. "Some of the magazines you've got filed in those detergent-box-filers over there probably came over on the ark!"

Connie walked over to the shelf, took out two of the most tattered files and lugged them back to her desk. "It probably doesn't help that Kerwin and I are essentially pack rats. Whenever I want to throw something out, he says no because we might need it, and when he wants to throw something out, I usually don't let him because I think we might need it."

Tallia laughed and shook her head. "You and Kerwin - you're sure a pair!"

"Well, I guess we just feel the same way about our books," said Connie. "They're like friends--"

"And it's hard to say goodbye to friends," sighed Tallia. She pulled one of the old magazines out of the box and wistfully flipped through the tattered pages. "Motorcycle Magazine ... Alex used to *love* these things. He'd sit reading them for hours."

"Yeah, I remember," Connie said gently. "It must be awfully strange for you, starting a new school year without Alex around."

"It's different all right," said Tallia, still fingering the magazine. She let out a deep breath and roused herself from her melancholy reflections. "Speaking of different, have you met the new English teacher who's taking Mrs. Tanner's place?"

Connie smiled and nodded. "Her name's Ellen Adams. She seems really nice - a real go-getter."

Tallia raised her eyebrows. "Go-getter?"

"Not in any kind of aggressive or abrasive way," explained Connie. "She's just really eager to get to know people and find her place in the school. She even took out some of last year's *Insider* to get to know about some of you guys."

"Well, she's a discriminating reader - that's good," said Tallia. "What did she think of our humble little newspaper?"

"She told me that she was very impressed with it," replied Connie. "She especially liked Greg's pieces on the floor hockey playoffs."

Tallia looked thoughtful. "Hmm... maybe another good sign."

"I wasn't sure you'd see it that way," Connie admitted. "I thought there was a bit of competition going on between you and Greg."

"Ah, that's more of a show to keep people entertained than anything else," said Tallia. "Truth is, I'd be kind of relieved if Ellen Adams turned out to be Greg's great champion. Maybe then Greg wouldn't give me so much flack about being *Teacher Tony's Pet.*"

Connie smiled knowingly. "Or at least give you something to throw back at him!"

Tallia shrugged. "Hey, you know my motto..."

"Don't get mad - **GET EVEN**!"

"Exactly," Tallia nodded. "And if it turned out that our new English teacher started giving Greg the same kind of attention that he always razzes me about getting from Mr. Harris, I'd be quite happy."

"Well, I guess time will tell," said Connie. "Hey, I haven't talked to you since you got back from your family trip to the mountains. How was it?"

Tallia shrugged. "All right, I guess."

"You don't sound too convinced of that," said Connie.

"Ah, maybe we're just getting too old for this family vacation thing," said Tallia. "Travis was all quiet and weird the whole time. Something's definitely up with him. I think he's all bent out of shape over getting into this new practicum program at school. All his buddies already got their acceptances." She shook her head. "I sure hope *I* don't get all weird like Travis if *I'm* ever at university."

Connie chuckled. "I'm sure you'll be the most well-adjusted university student ever."

"Yeah, right. Travis and my parents don't seem to think I'll ever make it to university. Sometimes I think they even have doubts about me getting through high school."

"Well, they're your family, and sometimes families can be experts at underestimating a gal," said Connie. "But when you do make it, no one will be happier or prouder."

"Except maybe you and Mr. Harris?"

"We'll definitely be in the top five," Connie assured her with a smile. "But for now, I think you'd better get going to class. You don't want to be late and get on your new teacher's bad side."

"Of course not, it would screw up my image as Super-Crip!" Tallia laughed as she flicked on her chair's power switch. "See you later."

Realizing by the hall clock that the clock in the library was a few minutes fast, Tallia debated whether she should venture downstairs and see if she could connect with Jo-Anne. But the distant sight of Greg making his solitary way down the hallway to the classroom made Tallia decide to follow suit - she and Jo-Anne hardly ever really *connected* any more anyway.

She entered the classroom and found Greg sitting alone looking intently out the window. "Hey there, ready for our last year as lowly juniors?" she asked cheerily.

Greg turned from the window and flashed his trademark sardonic grin. "Yup, all ready for another fun-filled year of education and rehabilitation here at Chez Crip." He wrinkled his forehead. "Education and Rehabilitation ... Geez, what a lame school motto! Makes us sound like a bunch of druggies or something!"

"Well, we do have the best-stocked school infirmary around."

"Yeah, come to think of it, this is some ritzy setup we've got here. An entire army of wheelchair-pushing, needle-pushing, suppository-pushing nurses at our disposal, a staff of brilliant teachers who can't seem to figure out whether to prepare us for the real world or protect us from it, and a full slate of school activities every year, which, if we're *really lucky*, might include a couple of funerals and school memorials."

"Nothing like starting the new school year off with a positive attitude, is there?" Tallia rolled her eyes. "Maybe you should ask to do your Work Experience in the P.R. Department - I'm sure you'd be a real asset!" She took a restless spin around the big empty classroom. "You know, I think this is the first time we've ever entered our new classroom on the first day of school without our respective sidekicks."

"Actually, *you* had a sidekick, I had a sidekick and a Klingon-like shadow," Greg corrected her.

Tallia frowned. "Do you really think you should talk about Alex like that?"

"Why not? That's how I talked about him when he was alive, and he never seemed to mind."

"That's because you were his idol, you could do no wrong."

Greg laughed wryly. "True - poor deluded kid! But he really got a kick out of playing little brother--"

Tallia folded her arms. "And you got an even bigger kick out of playing big brother."

"Yeah, I suppose I did." Greg briskly drove away from the window and changed the subject. "I saw your sidekick hanging out by herself downstairs. Why don't you have her in tow?"

"What's the point? Everything's gotten so weird between us," sighed Tallia. "We hardly ever really talk anymore, and when we do, we end up arguing. Jo's not Jo anymore. It's like she's totally shut herself off. Seems like all she ever thinks or talks about anymore is getting out of here, like that's going to suddenly make the CP go away and she'll be *normal*."

"I think losing Alex was the last straw for her," said Greg. "She just doesn't want to deal with the crap that happens around here anymore. In some ways, I don't blame her."

"Yeah, but this *normal* kick she's on - it's bad news," maintained Tallia. "I mean, even if she manages to get out of here somehow, she'll always be a crip, she'll always be *different*. She's never going to last out there if she doesn't learn to deal with that."

"Using me as a case study in your amateur psychology practice again, eh Tal?" Jo-Anne quipped snidely as she sped into the classroom. "Personally, I think you should stick to writing ... unless of course you go into partnership with Andrea--"

Tallia cringed with embarrassment. Greg gallantly stepped in to mediate. "Now Jo-Anne, you play nice with Tallia or Big Bad Andrea is gonna win her game of Divide and Conquer."

Jo-Anne just glared at Tallia.

Tallia sighed and shook her head."Too late, Greg. Looks like Jo-Ann's gonna win it for her."

"Look you guys, can the Bickerson's routine," Greg ordered sternly. "We're going to have a rookie teacher to break in and that's going to require our best group effort."

"Has anyone heard anything about this new teacher?" Jo-Anne asked.

"Her name's Ellen Adams, and, according to Connie, she's a real go-getter," said Tallia. "Connie said she took out a bunch of *Insiders* from the library so that she could learn about us and the school."

"Hmm... a discriminating reader! That's a good sign," mused Greg.

Tallia smiled slyly. "Actually, it may be debatable how discriminating she is; Connie said she especially liked *your* articles."

"Well, that settles it," declared Greg. "The woman's *obviously brilliant*!"

"Well, I just hope she's *brilliant enough* to get some of the old fogies around here off their butts and get going on the integration program," said Jo-Anne.

"Some cockeyed rookie out to liberate us *poor crips* ramming integration down everybody's throats? That's the *last* thing we need around here!" argued Tallia.

"I don't think we'll have to worry about that, Tallia," said Greg. "Do-Gooders in it to help us *poor, unfortunate crips* usually don't last long around here. Gotta admit, that's the one good thing about this place - unless they're halfway human and with it, they don't last long as staff."

"I really wish you people would learn that wheelchairs *are not* toys to just tear around in. You have to be careful with them." The approaching drone of Andrea's best lecturing voice rose out of the hubbub of the bustling hallway.

Tallia shook her head and smiled sardonically. "What was that you were saying, Greg?"

Greg shrugged. "A rule wouldn't be a rule without the exception," he sighed. "Wonder who the lucky victim is this time."

The classroom door swung open and in swooped an indignant Andrea pushing a sullen Zachary in a manual wheelchair that was filled with pillows in a make-shift arrangement to keep his frail body upright. The sight of Zachary without his prized electric wheelchair was rather unnerving. "Zack!" Tallia exclaimed in alarm. "What happened?"

"The fire escape ramp was open so I decided to avoid the congested elevators and drive upstairs," explained Zachary. "I was halfway up the ramp when my circuits blew."

"I never heard of such foolishness!" Andrea huffed. "You could have gotten seriously injured on that ramp!--"

"Actually no, that's why they put automatic brakes on electric wheelchairs."

Andrea was too intent on winding up to deliver a good, stiff lecture to pay any attention to the young offender's arguments. "And then, someone would have had to treat you, when we're short-staffed already. As it was, I had to leave my morning duties in the bus entrance, find you a manual wheelchair, transfer you, and take you up to class. I really wish you people would realize that there *are* other people in this school."

Tallia turned to Greg, sighed, and rolled her eyes, a blatant act of disrespect which did not escape Andrea's ever-hawkish gaze. Andrea immediately spun on her heels and faced her with a ferocious look.

"Speaking of which, Tallia," the grating voice continued, "I do hope you've had an adjustment in attitude over the summer and that you'll be more responsible and cooperative this year."

Tallia gritted her teeth and contorted her facial muscles into a deliberately fake smile. "I'll sure try my best."

"I certainly hope so," hissed Andrea. "And I also hope that you won't let the minor academic successes you had last year go to your head. You're still a long, long way from being independent enough or mature enough to make it out in the *real world*."

The only response that Andrea got from Tallia was an icy glare.

"I've got to go downstairs and *try* to get back on schedule," snarled Andrea. "Zachary, I'll be back here to take you to lunch at eleven-forty, so make sure you're ready. And Tallia, I suggest you be *on time* for lunch. Otherwise, I won't have time to feed you - or toilet you." She raised her head in indignation, turned on her heel, and left the room.

"Witch!" Zachary burst out in exasperation. "She thinks she's so high and mighty with her clipboard and her stupid schedule." He looked down disdainfully at his new unmechanized metal prison. "I'd like to put her in one of these things for a while and see how far her schedule gets her then!"

Tallia laughed sardonically. "Knowing Andrea, she'd have an entire army of Nazi-Nurse aides to look after her and keep nagging us, all according to her schedule!"

Rather than distracting him as intended, Tallia's sarcastic humour only made Zachary more angry. "Stupid witch! It's bad enough that I can't even move an inch by myself in this crate, now I've got her in my face. *Dammit!*"

"Chill out, Zack," Greg said calmly. "The crate is temporary, and probably so is Attila - I'm sure Dave will rescue you from Attila as soon as he gets freed up."

Tallia wheeled closer to Zachary. "Yeah, Zack, you're a guy, not one of *her girls*. Hence you're only subjected to her on an occasional basis, unlike some of us who have to deal with her full-time."

"Well, I'm sorry. But even just having to deal with her occasionally is too much for me." Zachary gritted his teeth. "I can't take relying on that witch to push me everywhere."

Tallia frowned thoughtfully for a moment and then lit up with an idea. "Who says you have to?"

"Well, it's a cinch I won't get too far under my own steam," sneered Zachary.

Tallia smiled slyly. "Who said anything about using your own steam?"

"What are you gonna do? Teleport me?"

Fortunately, Tallia was well-practiced in not allowing Zachary to side-track her with his sarcasm. "If you were in your electric right now, where would you go?"

"The mall down the street!"

Tallia rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh. "Come on, Zack, work with me. If you were in your electric right now, where, in this room, would you go?"

Zachary shrugged. "Over by the window, I guess."

Tallia grinned. "Your wish is my command - for this occasion only, mind you. Don't go getting ideas!" She switched her wheelchair into low gear, carefully drove up beside Zachary, and took a firm hold of his armrest with her right hand. She then gently raised her left hand onto her control box and slowly drove forward, pulling Zachary along beside her.

"Look out, here comes Towin' Tallia!" laughed Greg.

Even Zachary was beginning to shed some of his sullenness and enjoy the ride. "Hey, this is better than the A.M.A.!"

The journey across the classroom took Tallia and Zachary twice as long as tower and towee than as solo drivers. Tony appeared in the doorway with an unfamiliar woman just in time to witness their arrival at their destination.

"What do we have here?" Tony asked with a smile.

"Zachary blew up his chair, so Tallia decided to cheer him up by playing tow-truck," answered Greg.

"Actually, Tallia could start up her own business. Instead of U-Haul, it could be Crip-Haul," Zachary said wryly.

"I thought maybe I should start developing a skill to fall back on, just in case this writing thing doesn't work out," Tallia explained.

"I see. Well, I don't really think it will come to that," Tony laughed. He turned to the young woman with him. "You're going to have quite the bunch here."

The woman was in her late twenties, had a slight build, delicate features, short brown hair, and kind eyes that crinkled when she laughed. "Yes, I can see that," she smiled. "So, are you going to do the official introductions?"

"I'd be happy to," said Tony. "Mrs. Ellen Adams, I'd like you to meet the usually-mobile Zachary Collins, Jo-Anne Hanson, Tallia Taves, our writer-in-residence, and Greg Watson, her journalistic partner in crime. Guys, this is Mrs. Adams, your new teacher. So, by the authority invested in me as Vice-Principal of Inglewood, I now pronounce you Teacher and Class. Mrs. Adams, you may teach your students. I've got to get back to my office. Good luck."

"You may just need it!" Zachary murmured, prompting a sharp look of disapproval from Tallia, who saw the nervous excitement in Ellen's eyes and felt empathy.

Having carefully observed this exchange with silent amusement, Ellen flashed Tallia an appreciative smile before turning back to Tony. "Thanks, Mr. Harris. I'm sure we'll be just fine."

Tony disappeared out into the hall and Ellen was alone with her class. She walked into the middle of the room, looked round at her new students, and smiled pleasantly. "Well, this my first full-time teaching job, so I guess I'd better start earning my keep and get you guys to work. I suppose getting settled at desks would be a good place to start."

Greg and Jo-Anne immediately went to their desks, leaving Tallia stranded beside an immobile Zachary, her arm too tired to pull him any further.

Zachary's frustration was etched on his face as he silently motioned Tallia to ask for help.

"Mrs. Adams, would you mind giving Zachary a push to his desk, please? My towing arm has had it."

"Sure thing," Ellen responded, briskly walking over to Zachary and taking hold of the handlebars on his wheelchair. She wheeled him over to his desk and carefully began pushing the chair underneath the desk.

"Watch it!" snapped Zachary. "Don't hit my leg!"

Zachary's leg was in fact in absolutely no danger of hitting any part of the desk, and Ellen knew it. However, she realized that Zachary was nervous about being pushed by a rookie, so she stopped for an instant before gently easing the chair into place behind the desk. "There you go, Zachary," she said in a pleasant tone. "Are you okay now?"

"No," snarled Zachary. "You've got to put my arms up on the desk, but *be careful.*"

Zachary's classmates eyed him with questioning amazement. It was true that Zachary could be very demanding, especially when rendered totally immobile, but his cold shortness with Ellen, who was obviously well-intentioned, seemed uncharacteristically mean-spirited and caused a flash of reproach to streak from Tallia's eyes to Zachary's.

Although she was visibly taken aback by Zachary's behaviour, Ellen maintained her calm, pleasant demeanour and did as she was told. "How's that, Zachary?"

"Okay, I guess," muttered Zachary.

"Mrs. Adams, could you put my arms up on my desk too, please?" Greg requested in his most polite tone in order to make up for Zachary's rudeness.

"Sure thing, Greg," she smiled as she quickly walked over to him and gently put his arms up on the desk. "How's that?"

"Good, thanks, Mrs. Adams."

Ellen laughed softly to herself, struck anew by the unfamiliarity of the title. She glanced round at her students. "Listen guys, I've got to tell you that, besides being new to teaching, I'm also pretty new to being called Mrs. Adams, since I just got married in July. Every time somebody says *Mrs. Adams*, I turn around expecting to see my mother-in-law behind me - and that's a scary feeling."

Tallia and Greg smiled at each other. She had a sense of humour; this was a promising sign.

"So how would you guys feel if we drop the whole Mrs. Adams bit and you just call me Ellen? You calling me Mrs. Adams seems pretty silly anyway, since I have a kid sister who's younger than you are."

A teacher who treated them as equals. Tallia was becoming more and more impressed, and a little ashamed of herself for being slightly suspicious of Ellen when Connie first talked about her being a go-getter.

Greg was impressed too. "Sounds fine by us, Mrs.--Ellen."

"It'll probably take just a bit of getting used to, but we'll work on it," said Ellen. She walked up to the front of the room and faced her students. "Now, before we get to work on setting up our timetables, I'd like us to talk a little bit about some of your hopes and expectations for this new school year. That way, I'll get to know you a little better."

She paused for a response but none came. After several moments of awkward silence, Ellen chose the old teachers' standby of putting someone on the spot. "Let's start with one of our writers. Greg, what are some of your hopes and expectations for this new school year?"

Being singled out as a writer independent of Tallia was something that Greg was definitely not used to, although the grin on his face made it clear that he was sure he could get to like it. "Well, I guess I'd like to do more with my writing this year. I want to work on the *Insider* again of course, but I'd like to get into some other stuff too. I'm not sure what, though."

"I've read some of your *Insider* articles, Greg. I think they're excellent - especially your pieces on the floor hockey playoffs last spring," said Ellen. "Have you ever thought about submitting some of your articles and stories to magazines for publication?"

Greg shook his head. "Not really ... I mean, I'd like to--it'd be really cool to get something published in a *real* magazine--I just don't have any idea where to start."

"Well, if you like, I could get you issues of some local and regional sports magazines, and you can decide which ones you'd like to submit to," said Ellen. "There are no guarantees, of course, but I think it would be a good experience for you, regardless of the outcome."

Greg smiled and nodded, extremely pleased with himself and his new teacher.

Tallia was pleased too. No longer would she have to feel guilty about having a mentor when Greg didn't. Their odds were becoming even.

Ellen now turned to Tallia. "What about you, Tallia? What are some of your hopes and expectations for this year?"

"I'd like to keep up with my writing for the *Insider* and the Education Department Newsletter," said Tallia. "I'd also like to get into writing more creative stuff - poems and short stories."

Ellen nodded enthusiastically. "That's very good to hear, Tallia. I hope I'll see you in my Creative Writing course on Thursdays?"

"You bet!" grinned Tallia.

"Jo-Anne, what would you like to see happen this year?"

Jo-Anne cast a defiant look at Tallia before answering. "I hope they'll finally start getting us integrated into *normal* schools this year. Do you think they will?"

"It's possible," replied Ellen. "Would you like to start going out to a regular school part-time?"

"No, actually, I want to go out full-time," said Jo-Anne. "I want to go to school with *normal* kids."

"What? We're not *normal* enough for you?" sneered Zachary.

"That's got nothing to do with it!" Jo-Anne snapped defensively. "I just think we should all get the chance to go to normal schools and live normal lives like able-bodied kids do."

"I think I understand what you're saying, Jo-Anne," said Ellen. "And I agree that everyone should have access to the same education whether they're able-bodied or not--"

"But we're *not* able-bodied," Zachary broke in. "We drop books and we need them picked up. Our chairs break and we need to be pushed. We get sick and we d--"

"Not *all* of us," Jo-Anne cut him off, refusing to let him utter the horrible word. "And if I finally get the chance to go to the same school that my brother and sister did, why shouldn't I?"

"But what's the point of going to the same school as your brother and sister if you spend all day cooped with an aide, or, even worse, if you don't have a full-time aide and can't function at all?" argued Tallia.

"At least *I* have the guts to want to give it a try - unlike *some people*!" retorted Jo-Anne.

"I think both of you have made some valid points." Ellen walked over and stood between the girls' desks. "Jo-Anne, this is a very exciting time; new doors are opening for disabled people that should have been opened long ago, and you're right to be excited and eager to go through them. But Tallia's also right to think about the possible disadvantages of going through too many of those doors too soon. Integration is wonderful, but it might not be an automatic answer for everyone."

Jo-Anne's eyes narrowed. "So are you saying that I shouldn't want to be integrated as soon as I can? I thought the whole point of this place was to get us ready to go out into the *real world*."

"You're right, Jo-Anne. As I understand it, that's a big part of what Inglewood is all about," said Ellen. "But along with that objective goes the responsibility of making sure that when students do go out, they're going out into a situation that's best for them. It may be full-time integration, it may be part-time integration, or it may even mean staying here until graduation and finding a post-secondary placement. I guess what I'm saying is that I think the best thing to do for now is to concentrate on your work here - that way, when an opportunity for integration does come along, you'll be ready."

Tallia was impressed again. This was the most sensible view on the issue of integration that she had ever heard articulated by anyone at Inglewood. Jo-Anne, however, seemed far from impressed. It was obvious from the look of disappointment on her face that her hopes that Ellen would be an ally in her quest to escape from Inglewood and finally be *normal* had been dashed; all she got from her was the same wimpy double-talk that she got from all the other teachers. Evidently too discouraged to pursue the issue further, Jo-Anne remained silent and nodded passively.

After a brief hesitation, Ellen turned to Zachary and again asked what had suddenly become a loaded question. "And what about you, Zachary? What would you like to see happen this year?"

Zachary glared back at her, his eyes stone cold. "I'd like to stop having to rely on other people for everything from turning a page to taking a crap. And I'd like to stop having to go to funerals and school memorials for people who die. Don't suppose they taught you how to arrange *that* in university, did they?"

This was too much for Tallia. "Zachary, stop it! You're being a jerk!"

"Why?" challenged Zachary. "She wants to know about *expectations*, and I'm just telling it like it is."

Ellen's eyes were dark with pain, yet she spoke in a firm, determined voice. "It's all right, Tallia. I'm an English teacher, I believe that one of the most important and powerful things that we can do as human beings is to express our thoughts and feelings clearly and honestly, even when they're unpleasant." She turned to Zachary and addressed him in the same soft but firm tone. "Zachary, I don't pretend to understand your frustrations - there's no way I ever really could because I'm not you. But I firmly believe that we can all teach each other and learn from each other by communicating our experience--"

"Like that's going to change anything!" scoffed Zachary.

"Maybe not *change*, but it usually makes us feel less isolated," said Ellen. "It's true, I am a rookie Special Ed teacher straight out of university, and I don't know a whole lot about what it's like to go to school here, except that I've read the statistics that say one to three junior-senior high students die every year and that less than five percent of Inglewood students graduate with their high school diploma. But I hope that as we get to know each other, Zachary, you and the others will teach me what it really means to be in this school - not so I can rush around madly trying to *fix* things, but so I can begin to understand."

Zachary jerked his head in acknowledgement, though his expression did not change.

Clearly wrung-out emotionally, Ellen headed for safer territory. Retreating to her desk, she picked up a file folder. "Well now, I guess we'd better get to work on setting up our timetables."

Ellen's class now settled into a more familiar rhythm of scheduling therapies, choosing options, and writing the first language composition of the year. Although echoes of the tension which marred the first part of the morning lingered in Jo-Anne's passive petulance and Zachary's brooding silence, there seemed to be a general reluctance to set off any new confrontation. The class thus spent the rest of the morning observing an uneasy peace.

Lunchtime, and Tallia was late again. As was most often the case, it was not a premeditated act of defiance on Tallia's part but rather an unfortunate conspiracy of circumstances. Having finished her morning's work early, Tallia got leave to fetch Dave for a testy Zachary, who suddenly had to go to the bathroom and adamantly refused to be subjected to the indignity of being toileted by Andrea. Upon returning from her covert mission, Tallia met up with Tony, who needed "just a minute" to talk with her about her first Newsletter article of the year. Tony's "minute" had turned into five, and now she sat in front of a fuming Andrea, trying to defend her lateness without divulging her whereabouts.

"Where have you been?"

"Look, I'm sorry I'm late--I didn't mean to be. It won't happen again."

"I asked you where you've been."

"It's only five minutes--"

"I ASKED YOU WHERE YOU'VE BEEN!"

"Mrs. Adams asked me to take the copies of our timetables down to the Admin Office and the elevator was slow coming up," Tallia fibbed, not wanting to get Zachary into trouble and worsen his mood.

"Tallia, I specifically *told you* to be *on time* for lunch," growled Andrea. "Mrs. Adams is new, she probably doesn't quite know how things work around here yet. *You* should have explained to her that you couldn't be late for lunch. You're a big girl now, you should be able to speak for yourself--"

"Andrea, I dropped my fork." Zachary interrupted her in mid-rant, which only made her more angry.

Andrea tromped over to the end of the table where Zachary sat, picked up a new fork and roughly put it back into his hand. "This is the third time you've called me over here to reposition you or to pick something up. I suggest you start being less demanding and more considerate of other people."

Darts of contempt flashed from Zachary's eyes but he was silent.

With a dismissive grunt, Andrea turned and stalked back to Tallia. "Well, I guess if I hurry I can feed you now, but I won't be able to toilet you until after I finish Monica's dialysis. You'll have to wait for me in the bathroom until I'm done with Monica."

"But I've got to get back to the classroom and start working on my newsletter article," objected Tallia. "Mr. Harris says he needs it by Friday."

"Well, I'm sorry but I'm afraid it's not *my* problem if *you've* bitten off more than you can chew," Andrea said in a condescending tone. "Now come to the table so that I can start feeding you."

Realizing that it was pointless to do anything other than acquiesce, Tallia sighed and drove up to the table. Parking, she cast a sideways glance at Jo-Anne, who was staring straight ahead, pretending not to notice what was going on. Tallia had noticed her watching with grim intensity while Andrea scolded Zachary, but now she sat staring into space with her *get me out of here* look, not seeming to care anything about what happened to her nominal best friend. Long gone were the days when Tallia could count on Jo-Anne to at least attempt to stick up for her. In this moment of excruciating loneliness, Tallia began to realize that the emotional bond which she and Jo-Anne had shared for most of their lives was evaporating before her eyes, and that she would now have to face all her battles with Andrea and her insecurities about being able to follow through with her dream of becoming a writer totally without Jo-Anne.

* * *

"It's five o'clock, Tallia. How come you're so late? Did you miss your bus?" Anna fired questions at her as Jacob helped guide her wheelchair into the living room.

"No, I just got stuck on a milk run," replied Tallia, taking her purse out from beside her and throwing it onto a nearby chair. "Travis home yet?"

"No, and I don't know what's keeping him either," sighed Anna. With her usual efficiency, she undid Tallia's seatbelt and took off her jacket. "I wish he'd get here."

"Why? Is something up?" asked Tallia.

"Nothing worth talking about yet," Jacob interjected in an admonishing tone.

"Your father's right," Anna said quickly. "Do you want to sit on the commode in your room while I change your clothes?"

"Sure," Tallia agreed, slightly bewildered by the abrupt change of subject.

Within a matter of minutes, Tallia was sitting on the commode in her bedroom, relieving her bladder while her mother took off her shoes and nylons. Although her mother was evidently too preoccupied to ask, Tallia felt it would be appropriate to tell her something about her day. "I met our new teacher today. Her name's Ellen Adams."

"Oh, yes, that's right - I'd almost forgotten," said Anna, slightly ashamed of her lapse of parental awareness. "What's she like?"

Tallia paused in thought for a moment. "She's cool - I like her," she declared decisively. "She's quite young--a real rookie, fresh out of university--but she's no naive do-gooder. She's confident about what she knows, and she's not afraid to admit to what she doesn't know. And she seems to really respect us. She even told us to call her Ellen."

Anna knew that, no matter how hard she tried, she would not long be able to keep her attention from drifting away from her daughter. She therefore cut to the chase. "So you had a good day?"

"Not totally," sighed Tallia.

"Why not?" asked Anna.

"Well, for starters, Zachary's chair broke down so he was all ticked and he took it out on everybody - especially poor Ellen." Tallia took a deep breath before continuing her litany of woes. "Andrea was being a total hag, as usual, which put Zachary in an even *worse* mood. I don't even know Jo-Anne anymore - all she ever thinks or talks about anymore is going to a *normal* school. I don't know what makes Jo-Anne thinks going to a normal school would suddenly make life perfect - sometimes I'm not sure if I can even handle everything at Inglewood."

"What do you mean? You're not having trouble in school, are you?" Anna asked in alarm.

"No, Mom, it's nothing like that," sighed Tallia. "It's just that this year they put me and Greg in charge of the entire Current Events section of the *Insider*, and Mr. Harris wants me to write a regular column for the Education Department Newsletter again.–"

"I thought those were things that you *wanted* to happen," said Anna.

"They were-They *are*," Tallia insisted. "It's just that, sometimes, I'm afraid that I won't be able to handle it all."

"Well, it *does* seem like an *awful lot* for you to take on," said Anna. "And your schoolwork is probably going to keep getting heavier and heavier from here on in." She paused thoughtfully for a moment, weighing her words. "You know, maybe you should think about lightening your load."

"And how do I do that?" Tallia asked sceptically.

"Well, you *could* tell Mr. Harris that you don't want to write the Newsletter," Anna replied.

Tallia was truly amazed at how totally dense her usually sensible mother could be sometimes. "No, I *couldn't*!" she declared emphatically.

"Why not?" challenged Anna. "I mean, it's not as though writing for the Newsletter is part of your required school work."

Tallia shook her head in disbelief. "That doesn't matter! Mr. Harris is counting on me - I *can't* let him down!"

"But I think that maybe Mr. Harris doesn't really realize how long it takes you to write and do your schoolwork. It takes you three or four hours to type just one page. There were times last year when you had to stay up till midnight or later to get your work done. I'm sure Mr. Harris wouldn't want your schoolwork to suffer because of the Newsletter column," said Anna.

"*He* thinks I can do both," Tallia snapped defensively.

"But you just said yourself that you're not sure if you can handle everything," Anna reminded her.

"But that doesn't mean I'm ready to just give up on everything and let Mr. Harris down," said Tallia. "I told you that I was worried about being able to handle everything because, silly me, I thought you would encourage me and tell me that I was worrying for nothing, that I *could* do it. If I'd known you would tell me to just give up and throw in the towel, I would have just kept my mouth shut about the whole thing in the first place."

"Oh, Tallia, you *know* that I didn't mean to discourage you," sighed Anna. "I just know how many hours you have to put in just to keep up, and I worry about you taking on to much and getting over your head. I only want what's best for you, you know."

Tallia nodded in resignation. "I know." She wanted to explain to her mother how she wished that there would be just one time when she could talk to her about her writing without being reminded of all the limitations she faced and the overwhelming odds against her. But she knew that any attempt at having such a conversation with her mother would, most likely, only result in her mother making her feel even more guilty than she already did. So Tallia let her moment of opportunity slip away in silence.

The sound of the front door opening announced Travis' long-awaited arrival. Anna was suddenly all nervous agitation. "Your brother's home. Come on Tallia, let's get you dressed and into your manual."

Tallia could not for the life of her figure out why Travis' coming home was such a big deal. Before she knew it, she found herself sitting in her manual wheelchair, being wheeled into the living room. Jacob had heard the door and had rushed up from the basement to greet his son. For a moment, parents and son stood silently eyeing each other in tense anticipation, making Tallia wonder what on earth was going on.

Anna could not take the suspense anymore. "Well, how did it go today, Travis?" she asked timidly.

Travis smiled as he plopped his nap-sack on a nearby chair, took out an official-looking piece of paper and handed it to Anna.

With shaking hands, Anna took the piece of paper from Travis and began reading. "It's a **CONTRACT**!"

Travis grinned. "Yup! I got the job!"

Tallia was stunned. "Job? What job?"

"Little Sister, you, lucky person that you are, are looking at the newest intern at the accounting firm of Pierce and Walters!" Travis declared triumphantly.

Jacob stepped forward and gave his son a proud pat on the back. "Good for you, Son! I'm so proud of you!"

Anna beamed with delight. "That's wonderful, Son! I'm *very* proud of you too!"

Tallia was beginning to feel quite left out. "What did I miss here? Last I heard, you were all bummed out because all your buddies had placements and you didn't.'"

"This job wasn't on the placement list because it's full-time. One of my profs found out about it and gave them my name. I didn't know anything about it until they called me up this morning and asked me to come in for an interview," explained Travis.

"But, if it's a full-time placement, how are you going to take your university courses?" Tallia asked, realizing too late that she was beginning to sound like her mother.

Figuring Tallia had asked the question to enable him to get a jump on his parents before they could come up with reservations about taking the job, Travis addressed his reply more to his parents than his sister. "Luckily, the three courses I have to take this term are all offered at night," said Travis. "It'll make things a little hairy, I know, but it'll be worth it to get my foot in the door at Pierce and Walters. I think I can handle it."

"We *know* you can, Son," smiled Anna.

Tallia could not help but register the irony of this all too typical situation. When she, the little crip in the family, found herself facing a new and potentially risky challenge, more often than not, her mother would discourage her from taking it on, citing the most terrible and painful consequences that awaited her if and when she failed. However, when big, strong, able-bodied Travis faced bigger and even more risky challenges, their parents would confidently assure him that it was well within his ability to take on the challenge and master it. Tallia understood that this was not a case of parental favouritism or discrimination, it was simply the way things were in her family. She was a girl, the youngest, and a crip to boot, so of course she needed to be protected. She knew her parents would never go so far as to actually stop her from pursuing her dream, yet it pained her to know that they might someday say, "our daughter the disabled writer," but never just "our daughter the writer." She wished that she could make them see that, through her writing, she was gradually carving out an identity for herself that was independent of her disability. Tony saw it, Connie saw it, even Ellen was beginning to see it. Why couldn't *they*?

Well, maybe it was just like Connie said, `*Families can be experts at underestimating a gal.*` This was Travis' moment of triumph, and she was proud of him.

"Way to go, bro!" she grinned.

CHAPTER SIX - WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?

"It's 1:03. What's taking her so long?" Jo-Anne murmured as she paced the width of the classroom in her wheelchair.

"Gee, I don't know. Mr. Harris shouldn't really have anything to go on about at the staff meeting since Tallia hasn't had any major publications this month," teased Greg.

Tallia was passing the time by making a game out of trying to pick up the pencil that kept rolling elusively across her desk. "Har, har, very funny."

"Well, I just hope that Harris finally gets the guts to actually start moving on the integration program, instead of being the Wimpy Wonder he's been all year," said Jo-Anne.

"Mr. Harris is no wimp," Tallia snapped defensively. "He just cares enough about the school, and us, not to go rushing into anything half-cocked."

"That's the biggest load of bull I've ever heard!" scoffed Jo-Anne. "He cares about the school, maybe. But *us*? Forget it! He's just covering his butt because he doesn't want it to suddenly come out that a bunch of ordinary public school teachers can teach us just as well as these guys with their fancy-schmancy Special Ed degrees. It's been over a year since they first started *talking* about integration. When are they finally gonna stop *talking* and actually start *doing something* about it?"

"You've gotta admit, there is a lot of politics wrapped up in this whole integration spiel." Zachary fidgeted with the joystick on his chair. "The School Board might just decide that it looks better to have a token crip in every school than to keep us all segregated."

"That may work with some of the walkers," said Tallia. "But what about the forty-odd severely disabled junior-senior highs? Who's going to buy that they're all suddenly going to be better off in regular schools with little or no supports in place than they are here, in a fully-adapted school with small classes and individualized programs?"

Jo-Anne let out a sarcastic laugh. "Individualized programs - yeah, right! The programs are so individualized that Cathy Whitman was in Grade Nine before our *brilliant* teaching staff finally figured out she couldn't read and that teacher's aides had actually been doing her work for her, assuming that they were reading her mind because she can't talk."

"But, to be fair, that kind of stuff can happen in regular schools too," said Greg. "My cousin was in Grade Ten before they figured out that he had a reading problem."

"But that doesn't change the fact that this place is a joke as a school," Jo-Anne threw up her hands. "Name me one *real school* that has a graduation rate of less than five percent. All it usually means to *`graduate`* from this place is that you're too old to go to school so you get to sit home and watch TV all day."

Abandoning her pursuit of the elusive pencil, Tallia took hold of her joystick and turned slightly towards Jo-Anne. "And you think that situation's going to improve if they start dumping everybody into regular classes that are already overcrowded and have no kinds of support systems or support staff in place?"

Jo-Anne shook her head disdainfully. "Support staff? What, you mean like our own beloved Hag Hagarth? Call me crazy, but I don't think her sudden absence from my life would prove too detrimental to my development!"

"Look, I'm not saying that this place doesn't have its problems, it obviously does. But I still don't think everybody rushing out to become *normal* by getting integrated into regular schools is magically going to solve everything for everybody," explained Tallia. "Whether we're at Inglewood or not, we're still going to be crips and we're still going to have to deal with crip problems, problems that *normal* people will never really have a clue about. It's not like integration is suddenly going to make those problems all go away and make us all *normal*."

"Well, it's a cinch that hiding out in this place won't make anything better," said Jo-Anne. "There's no way *I'm* going to stay hidden away in a place where I can never be anything *but* a crip. If you want to keep hiding out here with Hag Hagarth breathing down your neck, that's *your* problem."

"Hi guys, sorry I'm late," Ellen greeted them as she hurriedly entered the classroom and deposited her files and purse on her desk.

"It's okay. Tallia and Jo-Anne were keeping us entertained with their latest instalment in the Great Inglewood Integration Debate," said Greg.

"Otherwise known as World War Three," Zachary dead-panned.

Ellen laughed. "You know, that sounds a lot like the staff meeting I just came out of."

"What happened at the meeting?" Jo-Anne asked anxiously.

"Well, integration is a very complex issue. As you know, people can have very different views on when integration is the right way to go and when it's not," said Ellen. "Sometimes even really good teachers can have serious disagreements over whether or not integration is right for their students."

"So you're saying that nothing got decided because, as usual, everybody was too chicken to really do anything about going ahead with the integration program," sighed Jo-Anne.

"No, actually, even though we had some rather heated discussion, we made some rather dramatic progress with the integration program," replied Ellen.

"Like what?" Jo-Anne asked eagerly.

"Well, we've been able to match five Inglewood juniors and seniors with five community schools. Some of the placements start next semester, but most will start in the fall."

Jo-Anne was all nervous agitation. "So who's going where when?"

"Well, Leslie Webster is going to Riverdale High part-time for Grade Twelve starting in September; Murray Neuman is starting part-time at Richmond

Park High in September; Cliff Burns is starting the new semester back at Hillview for full-time Grade Eight next month because that's where he went to school before his accident, and Alan McGregor will be starting Grade Eleven part-time at Keegano next month."

Jo-Anne seemed let down for a moment, then puzzled. "But that's only four - you said there were five."

Ellen grinned mischievously as she took a few steps closer to Jo-Anne. "That's right, I did say five. Let's see now, who else was there... Oh, yes, that's right... Number five was--*YOU!*"

Jo-Anne's limbs flew out in spasm as she let out an excited squeal. "*Yes! Finally!*" It was several moments before she could regain sufficient control of the muscles in her mouth and tongue to be able to produce intelligible speech. But when she finally regained a modicum of control, the questions were fired out just as fast as the partially-paralysed tongue could form them. "So what school am I going to? How big is it? I'll be starting next semester, right? Full-time, I hope. It *is* full-time, isn't it?"

"Whoa, Jo-Anne. Let's take this one step at a time," smiled Ellen. "What we have in mind is a part-time placement at Calder Junior-Senior High starting in September--"

Jo-Anne's face dropped. "Part-time in September?" she whined. "Why can't I start next month like Cliff and Alan?"

"Well, you're working at a Grade Eight-Nine level right now, but if you went out to Calder next semester already, they'd likely have to put you in a Seven-Eight Split," explained Ellen. "By postponing your going out to Calder until September, we'll have the chance to accelerate your program here and maybe be able to have you ready for Grade Ten in the fall."

"But that way, it might be a whole year or more before I go out full-time," groaned Jo-Anne. "Isn't there any way I could get into that Seven-Eight Split for next month?"

Ellen hesitated. "There *might* be. We'd have to talk about it with the teachers at Calder, and your parents, of course--"

"Oh, my parents will say yes. I'm sure they will," Jo-Anne said quickly.

Again Ellen hesitated; her expression became serious. "Believe me, Jo-Anne, I understand your eagerness and excitement--I'm excited for you. But I need you to understand that opting for going into the Seven-Eight Split at Calder next month might put you back a whole year or more, and, frankly, I'm not sure it would be a good move for you academically."

"But what about socially?" countered Jo-Anne. "Couldn't it be worth taking a couple of steps backwards in my school work to get a better chance of learning to fit into a normal school with normal kids?"

"Well, I guess that will ultimately be up to you; you're old enough, and mature enough, to make that decision for yourself." Ellen smiled as she patted

Jo-Anne on the shoulder. "So, whatever you decide, you can count on me to back you up."

"Does that mean you'll talk to the teachers at Calder about me starting next month?" Jo-Anne asked earnestly.

"You got it," said Ellen.

Like Greg and Zachary, Tallia refrained from interjecting her own views on the situation into Jo-Anne's discussion with Ellen, lest Jo-Anne accuse her of trying to prejudice Ellen against her wish to be integrated into a regular school as quickly as possible, regardless of the academic consequences. But while Greg and Zachary seemed quite content to keep their opinions on Jo-Anne's push for integration to themselves, Tallia found it almost impossible not to voice her very strong reservations. Hence, when Tallia found Jo-Anne alone in the classroom after recess, she could no longer resist the compulsion to say something to her about the situation. "Jo--" she began tentatively. "About this deal with you going into the Seven-Eight Split at Calder--"

"Finally, the lecture! I knew it was coming, I just couldn't figure out what was taking you so long," Jo-Anne declared abruptly.

"No lectures, I promise," Tallia said soberly. "I just want to talk."

"You mean, talk *with* me? Now, that's a switch, since you're usually quite happy talking *at* me, or, even better, *about* me!" sneered Jo-Anne.

Tallia let out a heavy sigh. "Look Jo-Anne, I don't want to get into another argument; or rehash everything we said before. I just want to understand what's going on in your head."

"Well, Dr. Freud, it's really not that complicated. I'm going to do whatever I have to to get out of this joke of a school and into a *normal* school just as soon as I can," Jo-Anne said flatly.

"Okay, so you want to go ahead with getting integrated, that's one thing. But why can't you just play it Ellen's way and take it slow?"

"Because playing it Ellen's way is playing it the Inglewood way, and I've seen enough of the bureaucracy that goes on around here to know that playing it the Inglewood way could just mean staying stuck here part-time right through high school."

Tallia threw up her hands in exasperation. "You're saying that being set back a whole year, maybe more, is better than just maybe having to stick around here part-time for high school? Jo-Anne, that doesn't make any sense."

"Well, I'll tell you what *does* make sense. I've finally figured out what game you're playing!"

"Game? I'm not playing any game--"

"Oh come on, Tallia, sure you are!" declared Jo-Anne. "You're trying to make me look stupid for not playing it Ellen's way. You want to make sure that I'm too busy defending myself to call you on the fact that the Great Tallia Taves, Inglewood's Writer-in-Residence, runs screaming at the mere mention of integration because she knows she couldn't cut it in a *normal* school."

"That's a load of bull and you know it!" snapped Tallia. "What's the matter with you? Did you suddenly go so brain-dead that you can't see that I'm worried about you?"

"Worried about me - yeah, right!" scoffed Jo-Anne. "When was the last time you even pretended to care about what *I* want or need? You've been way too busy telling everybody who would listen about how I have this unhealthy obsession with being normal because I can't really handle being disabled. You're not worried about *me*, you're just afraid that I might make it out there and show you up as a coward for not wanting to go out into the *real world!*"

"If you *really believe that*, you don't know me at all," Tallia said quietly.

"Well, from the way you've been acting lately, it seems you don't *want* to know me. I don't think you ever really did," Jo-Anne responded coldly. "So you can save your phony concern, I don't need it."

Tallia desperately wanted to defend herself, to express her righteous indignation at being unfairly labelled insincere and self-centered, but that impulse was effectively stifled by Jo-Anne's accusing gaze and her own accusing conscience. Although the arrival of Ellen and the boys for their afternoon Language class put an abrupt end to the painful confrontation, Tallia found it very difficult to concentrate on her grammar lesson with Jo-Anne's angry accusations ringing in her ears. Could it be that there was a grain of truth in what

Jo-Anne had said about her? Looking back, she had to admit that there were times when she had used Jo-Anne's stubborn rush towards integration and her increasing coldness towards her as excuses to complain to others about her attitude and behaviour, rather than making more of an effort to talk to Jo-Anne about the problems between them. Just maybe, if she had spent more time listening instead of arguing, Jo-Anne would at least have accepted her concern as genuine. As painful as Jo-Anne's total rejection was, it hurt even more to realize that it had been caused, at least in part, by her own insensitivity. Whether or not Jo-Anne succeeded in her quest for a speedy escape from Inglewood, Tallia now knew beyond doubt that Jo-Anne had already chosen to sever any and all ties that remained between them.

A week passed, and once again Ellen returned from lunch with a major announcement. "Jo-Anne, I've just got off the phone with the Vice-Principal of Calder--"

Instantly, Jo-Anne was all animation. "So, what's the word?" she asked eagerly.

"The Vice-Principal has given the okay for you to go into the Seven-Eight Split--"

Looks of surprise flashed between Tallia, Greg, and Zachary, all of whom were half expecting Calder to back out at the last minute.

Jo-Anne let out a squeal of delight; her body became rigid with spastic energy as she braced herself upon her footrests. "YES!" she exclaimed with breathless excitement. "So how big is the class? When do I start? Have you talked to the teacher yet? What's the teacher like?--"

Ellen wisely cut Jo-Anne off before the list of questions got too long to remember. "Let's take this one thing at a time, shall we?" she smiled. "First of all, you're scheduled to start half days next Monday afternoon. The class you're going into has thirty-five students. The teacher's name is Miss Jacquie Carter, and yes, I have spoken to her--" The smile vanished from Ellen's face and she seemed at a loss for what to say next.

Concerned by Ellen's apparent distress, Greg decided to try to take some of the pressure off her by opening up the discussion. "Why do I get the feeling that there's something not quite kosher with this teacher?"

"Oh, come on," groaned Jo-Anne. "She's *okay*, isn't she?"

Ellen hesitated. "Well, I only really spoke with her for the first time today, so it's probably premature to be making judgements..."

"But?" coaxed Greg.

"Well," sighed Ellen. "She gave me the impression that she isn't really all that comfortable with having a severely disabled student in her class."

"But then, why would she agree to take on Jo-Anne in the first place?" asked Greg.

"She might not have had much choice in the matter," answered Ellen. "Both the Principal and Vice-Principal at Calder are very much pro-integration."

Jo-Anne was beginning to panic. "But it's not like she's refusing to take me or anything, right?" she asked in a shaky voice.

Ellen paused, choosing her words very deliberately. "N-no, but, when I described your disability to her, she did question whether you could really function in a regular classroom without causing too much of a disruption."

Zachary rolled his eyes. "Bad news, Jo-Anne. Sounds like your basic Cripaphobe, if you ask me!"

"Yeah," Greg agreed. "I'd really think twice about going into a class with *that* kind of teacher if I were you."

"But you're *not* me!" snapped Jo-Anne. She turned back to Ellen with defiant determination. "You told her that I *could* function in a regular classroom without causing a disruption, didn't you?"

"Yes--provided you have the proper assistance," replied Ellen.

"Will there be a teacher's aide in the class to help out?" asked Greg.

Ellen nodded. "Part of the time, at least."

"There!" Jo-Anne proclaimed resolutely. "So there's really no problem."

"I certainly hope not," Ellen sighed apprehensively. She walked over to Jo-Anne and put her hand on her arm. "Look Jo-Anne, I know how eager you are to be integrated. But I really want you to go out into the *best* situation possible, and, after talking to Jacquie Carter today, I've got to tell you that I'm honestly not sure if this is it. Since you're going to be in a Seven-Eight Split, it's very important that the teacher takes the time to determine your strengths and weaknesses and work with you accordingly. So, if, after spending a little while in that class, you find that you're not getting the help or attention you need, I want you to let us know. There'd be no harm in you withdrawing from the class and trying another class next year, if this doesn't work out."

Jo-Anne nodded obediently, though it was apparent from the defiant glint in her eyes that she had absolutely no intention of retreating back to full-time at Inglewood, no matter how tough the *real world* of Jacquie Carter's class got.

Although she had found it almost impossible to do, Tallia stayed out of the class debate on Jo-Anne's decision, for she knew only too well that any note of caution she offered would be viewed by Jo-Anne as a selfish attempt to thwart her brave quest for independence in order to keep her own cowardice under wraps. Consequently, Tallia was rather surprised when, upon returning from recess and finding her alone in the classroom, Jo-Anne greeted her with, "So, how come you didn't get in on the class discussion of how big a mistake I'm making by going into the class at Calder?"

Tallia shrugged. "I figured you already heard how I feel about the situation so you wouldn't want to hear it again."

"And of course you think I'm making a *huge* mistake that's going to just *ruin* the rest of my life!" Jo-Anne sneered, adding melodramatic emphasis for effect.

"And of course you think the only possible reason I could think that way is because I don't want you to succeed out there and show me up as a coward for not wanting to be integrated," retorted Tallia.

Jo-Anne's mouth curled into a contemptuous smirk. "What's the matter, Tallia? You mad that somebody finally figured it out?"

"No, I'm mad that you're going to screw up your life just to prove you're *normal* when you're not," Tallia returned coldly.

Before Jo-Anne could come up with a suitably hurtful response, Andrea came blustering into the room. "I *told* you girls this morning that you were supposed to come for your monthly weight check at two-fifteen," she huffed. "Why didn't either of you show up?"

"I went to the infirmary at two-fifteen, no one was there, so I left," Tallia explained.

"You should have waited at the infirmary until I got there," Andrea said sternly. "You *know* that my schedule is very demanding and I can't be in two places at once." She turned to Jo-Anne with equal severity. "And *why* weren't *you* there?"

Jo-Anne shrugged complacently. "I guess I just forgot."

Andrea's mouth tightened with anger. "Forgot?!"

"Yeah, but it's really no big deal since I'm not gonna be around for afternoon monthly weight checks from now on," Jo-Anne said smugly.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Andrea.

"Ellen just told me that it's all set up for me to go to Calder half days starting Monday afternoon," Jo-Anne announced triumphantly. "And, with any luck, it won't be long before I'm out of here altogether."

Almost in spite of herself, Andrea allowed a smile of pleasant surprise to spread across her face. "Is that so? Well, I must admit I'm impressed! To be honest, I'm still not at all sure that you're independent enough to make it out in the *real world*, but at least *you're* brave and mature enough to *want* to get out there." She cast a disdainful glance at Tallia. "Unlike *some people*."

Much more disturbing to Tallia than Andrea's put-down was Jo-Anne's look of smug assent. It seemed as though Jo-Anne actually enjoyed having someone praise her decision and put Tallia down for opposing it; it didn't even matter that the affirmation came from the woman who embodied everything that she was trying to escape from by being integrated.

That smug look of haughty superiority on Jo-Anne's face was something that her classmates saw a lot of in the next few weeks. Once she started spending her afternoons at Calder, she would begin each morning at Inglewood by giving her classmates a glowing account of how liberating it was to finally be accepted into a *normal* school and able to circulate among *normal* students. When pressed, she had to admit that Jacquie Carter sometimes seemed to ignore her until the teacher's aide came into the room. Still, she was quick to insist that it was only because she just wasn't quite used to her yet and that she would soon come around to being totally comfortable with her. While her classmates remained sceptical about her glowing description of life at Calder and her pollyanna insistence that Jacquie Carter's apparent unease with having a disabled student in her class was only temporary, they generally refrained from questioning Jo-Anne's account of the goings-on at Calder, realizing that this would only aggravate her general antagonism towards Inglewood and all who remained there. Soon, instead of being an unnerving reminder to her classmates of the drastic changes now taking place at Inglewood, Jo-Anne's absence each afternoon became a welcome break from her constant Inglewood-bashing.

Growing tired of the ongoing debate over the merits and drawbacks of Jo-Anne's placement at Calder and the whole integration program in general, Jo-Anne's classmates found other things to occupy their attention. Slowly shrinking classes provided a curiously compelling reason to always have one's homework done as any one student's chances of being called on in class rose dramatically. And even initiating extracurricular activities seemed to require much more of a concerted effort on the part of the remaining Inglewood students. With the Senior Vice-President of the Students' Union now going to a regular school part-time, Zachary was kept increasingly busy by his growing responsibilities as Junior Vice-President. Tallia and Greg were both kept busy with their work on the paper, as well as their own writing projects; Tallia was working on a short story for a provincial writing contest, while Greg was anxiously waiting to hear from Canadian Sportsweek about an article that Ellen had submitted on his behalf. Yet, despite these distractions, there were frequent reminders of the changes that were taking place and the even bigger changes that loomed ahead. The February Junior-Senior High Assembly was one such reminder.

"I can't believe they're actually talking about scaling down the Students' Union Exec next year!" Tallia declared as she followed Greg and Zachary back into Ellen's classroom after the assembly. "They're even talking about maybe dissolving the Sports Committee entirely. Poor Alex would be having fits!"

"Yeah, he probably would," sighed Greg. "But you can see why they're starting to talk about scaling back. If the pilot integration program for this semester works out, they're probably going to try to get a lot more people out full-time or at least part-time during the course of next year. So there might be no choice but to scale down the Exec - it wouldn't make much sense to have an Exec that's almost as big as the whole student body."

"It's this whole big push for integration that doesn't make sense if you ask me," muttered Tallia. "Jo-Anne hasn't handed in one Language assignment for Ellen on time since she started at Calder. *That's* progress? And I *know* you guys don't buy that bull about the teacher paying more attention to her once she gets more used to her any more than I do. So, you tell me, how does any of that make sense?"

"Well, to be fair, Jo-Anne's situation may not be typical of the whole integration program. I mean, she did kind of push things faster than the teachers had really planned on," said Greg. "I was talking to Alan McGregor at the floor hockey game yesterday. He said the teachers at Keegano are really on the ball and help him out a lot. So I guess there are times when integration can make sense."

"And, whether it makes sense or not, it seems like it's gonna be the big trend around here. So you guys better watch it - you could end up being the entire *Insider* staff! Talk about *Editorial Control*!" Zachary laughed sardonically.

"That's *not funny*, Zack," Tallia snapped irritably.

"Chill out, Tallia," Greg said calmly. "The paper will be fine, we'll make sure of it. And it's not like the paper's the only thing we've got going. Harris is going to keep you writing for the Education Department Newsletter *at least* until you graduate, and you've already got a burgeoning career as an essayist and short story writer--"

Tallia's grim face brightened. "And you've got your own *burgeoning career* as a sports writer--at least you will when Canadian Sportsweek publishes that article you sent them."

Greg grimaced. "Yeah, well, we'll see what happens. I don't want to go jinxing anything by talking about it," he said quickly.

"What don't you want to jinx by talking about?" Ellen asked cheerily as she entered the room.

Greg, who had made a point of not letting on to anyone--especially Ellen--how anxious he was about the fate of his article, was now rather embarrassed; he did not want to make Ellen feel obligated to give him potentially false assurances. "It's nothing really ... It's just ..."

"I brought up the article you guys sent to Canadian Sportsweek," confessed Tallia. "It never occurred to me that talking about it could jinx it."

Greg looked away in embarrassment, but Ellen's gentle voice and understanding smile drew his eyes back to her. "Well, I'm afraid we pretty much have to talk about it now, since this letter just came from Canadian Sportsweek," she said as she took an envelope out of her bag and gently placed it into Greg's limp hand as it lay on the desk.

For a moment, Greg sat spellbound, staring at the envelope. When he finally found his voice, it was hushed and anxious. "It's a small envelope - that's good, isn't it? I mean, if they had rejected it, they would have needed a big envelope to send it back, wouldn't they?"

"W-Well, I think they do sometimes send out rejection slips before they send back the manuscripts--" Ellen admitted reluctantly.

Greg's face dropped in disappointment.

Ellen smiled understandingly as she put her hand on his shoulder. "Look, you know that I think the article you submitted was excellent, but the only way we're going to know *anything* for sure about what Canadian Sportsweek thinks is by opening the letter."

Greg nodded and flashed a nervous smile. "You're right." With great effort, he inched his hand across the desk and held the letter out to Ellen. "Could you read it for me and just give me the bottom line?"

"Sure," Ellen agreed in a reassuring tone. With eager but steady hands, she opened the envelope and took out a single-page letter. She began reading with a deliberately neutral expression but, within a few moments, her eyes lit up and the beginnings of a grin flickered across her face.

"Well?" Greg asked anxiously.

Ellen crouched down so that her eyes were level with Greg's. Putting her hand on his shoulder, she broke into a huge grin and gleefully announced, "They've accepted your article for publication! It's going to be in next month's issue!"

Greg's eyes grew big. "*Really*?"

"Really!"

Greg closed his eyes and breathed an exquisite sigh of relief and satisfaction. "*Yes*!"

"Congrats, pal," grinned Zachary. His grin became mischievous as he turned to Tallia. "Well, Miss Writer-in-Residence, it looks like you're going to have to move over and make room - you won't be the only published author around here for much longer!"

Tallia responded with a good-natured laugh. "That's fine by me; it was getting kind of lonely up here at the top." She flashed Greg a knowing smile. "Way to go, Greg. I always knew you had it in you - *maybe*!"

"Thanks a lot, Tallia. I'll try not to crowd you *too much* with my *humble but brilliant* literary talent," teased Greg.

"I'm sure that there's more than enough room around here for *two* star writers," said Ellen.

Though Greg's eyes remained bright with joy, his gaze took on a distinct intensity as he turned to Ellen. "You know, you really deserve a lot of the credit for making this happen--"

Ellen shook her head. "No way. You were the one who did all the work writing the article."

"Yeah, but you were the one who talked me into submitting the article in the first place," insisted Greg. "You really *believed* in me, and I just wanted to say ... I really appreciate it - thanks."

Ellen was visibly moved. "Well, you're very welcome," she said softly, bending forward to give him a quick hug. "I'm very proud of you."

"Good afternoon, all," Tony greeted them cheerily as he entered the room. "I just came by to drop off the revised Newsletter schedule for Tallia." He strode across the room to where she was sitting and handed her the papers. "We've decided to put out a special edition for Education Week at the end of March, so that means we'll need you to write two articles next month. Think you can handle that?"

Tallia laughed. "Do I have a choice?"

"Well, actually, no, not really," Tony admitted. Giving her a playful pat on the shoulder, he added, "But then, that's what you get for being our Writer-in-Residence."

"Actually, it looks like we've got *two* Writers-in-Residence," Ellen came in eagerly. Placing her hand proudly on Greg's shoulder, she triumphantly announced, "Greg has just received word that one of his articles is going to be published in Canadian Sportsweek!"

"Well, that's great news, Greg. Congratulations." Tony smiled cordially, stepping forward to pat him on the shoulder. "It looks like Inglewood's got itself quite a formidable writing team in you and Tallia."

"Thanks, Mr. Harris." Greg accepted Tony's congratulations with an amiable grin. But when Tony took his leave without saying anything more about his triumph, and Ellen stepped out to get a film projector from the library, Greg couldn't resist needling Tallia about her still being Tony's favourite. "Well, isn't this interesting! The first time *you* got published, Harris declared it *your* day and was ready to grant you anything your little heart desired; all *I* got from him was a measly `*Congratulations!*'"

Although Tallia had already registered this discrepancy in her own mind, Greg's needling comment caught her off guard, for she had yet to decide whether she should let it be a source of pride or a source of guilty embarrassment. For now, she chose to duck the issue. "Well, I think Ellen pretty much evens things out, don't you? I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if she goes out and rents a sky-writer to tell the world about your triumph!"

But it turned out that Ellen was quite successful in getting out word of Greg's achievement without the aid of a sky-writer. In fact, even though Greg's article didn't actually appear in print for another month, the announcements that Ellen wrote for the school paper and the Education Department Newsletter made Greg's achievement the talk of the school within a matter of days. Although, in the weeks that followed, Tallia was often teased by Zachary about how jealous she must feel at having been bumped out of the spotlight by Greg, the truth was that she was actually quite relieved that she no longer had to bear the burden of being the one star student at Inglewood. Admittedly, the temptation to be jealous of Greg might have been considerably greater had Tony gotten just as excited over his achievement as he'd been over hers; but as it was, Greg had Ellen as his mentor, she had Tony as hers, so she was quite content to move off center-stage and watch from the sidelines with Zachary as Greg basked in the spotlight.

But while Tallia and Zachary joined the rest of the school in celebrating Greg's achievement, Jo-Anne barely took enough notice to offer Greg her congratulations; it seemed as though she had become virtually oblivious to anything going on back at Inglewood that didn't directly affect her hopes of going to Calder full-time in the fall. Consequently, although Greg's article appeared in print a week before Spring Break, it was not until the day before Spring Break that something happened at Inglewood to get Jo-Anne excited.

"Jo-Anne, we had a meeting yesterday with the Vice-Principal of Calder to discuss your placement for next fall." Ellen informed her during the customary morning class announcements.

"And?" Jo-Anne asked eagerly.

"On Jacquie Carter's recommendation, he's approved your full-time placement in the Grade Nine class next fall - on one condition."

Jo-Anne swallowed hard in an attempt to dislodge the large lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. "What condition?"

"That the School Board provide you with a full-time aide in and out of the classroom."

Tallia could not conceal her scepticism. "Why would they insist on Jo-Anne having a full-time aide *in class*? She's never needed one here."

"I know," sighed Ellen. "But apparently Jacquie Carter feels very strongly that, because Jo-Anne requires a fair amount of physical assistance in the classroom, it wouldn't be fair to the teacher to put her in a class with thirty-five other students without her own full-time aide."

Zachary rolled his eyes. "Funny how the teachers around here are able to handle combined classes of ten or twelve crips with no aides around, but *regular* teachers can't even handle having *one* crip in a class without an aide."

Jo-Anne inched her chair back and forth nervously. "The School Board *will* approve a full-time aide for me, *won't they*?"

"Well, there is quite a big debate going on within the School Board over if and when it would be financially responsible to provide a full-time aide for an individual student," explained Ellen.

"They don't want to fork out the money for a full-time aide unless it's for the kind of student that will do really well and make them look good politically," said Greg.

Ellen nodded. "That's part of it. But there are also people who make the argument that putting a disabled student in a regular classroom with a full-time aide defeats the whole purpose of integration because it's likely that the only interaction that the student will have with others would be through the aide."

"That's a good point," Tallia came in quickly. "Even the teacher could just deal with the aide instead of the student. It's the perfect out for a Cripaphobe teacher."

"And of course no one could ever accuse the school or the School Board of neglecting the student with the disability because, hey, they provided a full-time aide," Greg pointed out.

Zachary let out an ironic laugh. "Segregated integration - neat concept! That's what I call *real progress*!"

"Well, to be fair, I'm sure there are situations where having a full-time aide can work out very well," said Ellen. "I guess it just depends on the people involved and whether or not they're really committed to making integration work to the student's best advantage."

"So what about my placement at Calder with a full-time aide?" Jo-Anne questioned nervously. "I mean, you *are* going to recommend to the School Board that they give me a full-time aide, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, as a staff, we've basically decided to do whatever we can to ensure that this placement goes through for you," replied Ellen. "But before this process goes into its final stages, I want to make very sure that you're okay with the way people have responded to you at Calder, and that you're getting the attention and acceptance that you need and deserve."

Jo-Anne spoke very slowly and deliberately, choosing her words carefully. "Look, I might not be the most popular girl at Calder, and I might not be Teacher's Pet, but I'm getting along okay, and I *want* to go to school there full-time. Don't I *deserve* a chance to go to a *normal* school and have a *normal* life like everybody else?"

"Of course you do, Jo-Anne." Ellen let out a little sigh as she walked over to her and put her hand on her shoulder. "Listen, I'd be lying if I said that I didn't still have some reservations about you having to have a full-time aide to go to Calder in the fall. I feel that having a full-time aide in class can cause a temptation for even the best student to become dependent and isolated--"

Jo-Anne opened her mouth to protest, but Ellen motioned for silence so that she could finish. "But I know how important this full-time placement is to you, and I think you have the right to have significant input into the decisions that are made about your program--"

"Does that mean you'll support the request to the School Board for a full-time aide?" Jo-Anne asked hopefully.

"You got it," Ellen smiled. "And with our recommendation, I can't really see the School Board *not* approving a full-time aide for you next year."

"Thanks, Ellen!" Jo-Anne exclaimed jubilantly. "You're a *real pal*!"

But Tallia had a very different idea of what being a *real pal* to Jo-Anne in this situation would involve. Although she understood and respected Ellen's commitment to empowering her students to take control of their own lives whenever possible, she could not help but think it somewhat weak, or even irresponsible, of her not to act upon her reservations by discouraging Jo-Anne from pushing for a full-time placement at Calder. She knew, both from what Jo-Anne said and what she didn't say, that she was being virtually ignored by both staff and students at Calder, for if she had found even one friend among her *normal* schoolmates, she would have bragged about it. She also knew that she had long since lost any power she'd had to influence Jo-Anne's decisions; yet, she just couldn't bear to sit by silently and watch while the person she had called her best friend since she was five made a mistake that could potentially haunt her the rest of her life. So, upon finding herself alone in the classroom with Jo-Anne during recess, Tallia decided to make one last attempt to clear the air between them and voice her concerns about her going to Calder full-time under these circumstances.

"Quite the announcement Ellen made this morning, eh?" Tallia began awkwardly.

"Yup, with any luck, three more months and I'm outta here," Jo-Anne responded briskly. She flashed a smug smirk at Tallia. "And *you* said it wouldn't happen!"

Tallia took a deep breath. "I still don't know if it *should* happen - at least not this way--"

"I told you before, you can save your phony concern," snapped Jo-Anne. "I don't *need* it, and I don't *want* it."

"Whether you want to believe it or not, the concern's for real," insisted Tallia. "I'm really worried that you're making a major mistake."

"Oh yeah? Well, let's see ... What *good reason* could I *possibly* have for even thinking about making such a *major mistake*? ... How's this for starters? - At Calder, I'll be at a school where people actually *graduate*. Novel idea for a school, eh?"

"Yeah, but will *you* graduate?" challenged Tallia. "I mean, it might be a little tough to pass those provincial Departmental Exams if you keep getting teachers who totally ignore you and then pass you off to the next grade the way this one is."

"I'll get by. I always have," Jo-Anne snapped defensively. "Besides, now I'll have my own full-time aide. You'll still be stuck here with Andrea breathing down your neck. And *I'm* the one who's making the big mistake? - *NOT!*"

Tallia could only sigh and shake her head as Jo-Anne went on. "See, that's the difference between you and me, Tallia. You may be the star writer, Teacher Tony's Pet, and all that, but *I'm* the one with the smarts and the guts to see the crap that goes on around here for what it is and get out from under. Calder is a *normal* school with *normal* students who go to basketball games instead of therapy and proms instead of school memorials."

"So, what? Does that mean that if Greg or Zachary *die* while you're off living your perfect little *normal* life at your perfect little *normal* school, you won't come back for the memorial because it would be too *abnormal* for you?"

"At least I won't be here to watch them get sick," Jo-Anne replied coldly. "At least with *normal* friends, I'll know they won't die on me."

"So, once you have *normal* friends, it won't matter so much if one or two of your old crip friends croak?" Tallia questioned indignantly. "Tell me, just how many *normal* friends have you made at Calder so far, huh? Is there anybody that hangs out with you at recess or after school? Is there anybody that even really talks to you besides saying hello or goodbye?"

"It takes time to make friends," insisted Jo-Anne. "Once I'm at Calder full-time, I'll have lots more chances to meet people. I'll probably have tons of friends by the time I graduate." She wheeled closer in a challenging posture. "But what about you? I mean, say you stay hidden away in this place until you graduate, you've got all these big dreams of going to university; if you do somehow get there, who's gonna be around to support you when you're out there with no contacts and no experience of the *real world*? What will you have left from the years you've wasted in this place? Zachary and Greg will either be sick or dead, and Ellen will probably be too busy looking for a new job to worry about what happens to you."

"Connie will still be around," Tallia said quickly. "And so will T--" Her voice broke off in sudden hesitation.

"What? *Tony?*" Jo-Anne let out an ironic laugh. "You were going to say *Tony*, weren't you?"

"Yeah, so what if I was?" Tallia snapped defensively.

"Come on, Tallia, reality-check time!" sneered Jo-Anne. "What, do you think that, when you're graduated and maybe in university, you and Tony will--what?--spend evenings talking on the phone every couple of weeks, go out for lunch regularly, maybe go over to each other's houses once in a while and hang out?"

Tallia wriggled uncomfortably in her wheelchair. "Maybe ... something like that ... I don't know ..."

Jo-Anne rolled her eyes and shook her head. "For crying out loud, Tallia, the guy's the *Vice-Principal*! Do you *really think* he's gonna want to spend time hanging around with an ex-student?"

"It's more than that," insisted Tallia. "He really cares about me--"

Jo-Anne raised her eyebrows. "Oh, *really?*"

Tallia let out a sigh of frustration. "And I care about him."

"It looks to me like you're *in love* with him."

"We're *friends!* - I don't know why you can't get that!"

"Well, I'll tell you what I *can* get finally," Jo-Anne returned coldly. "I was wrong; it's not just because you know you couldn't hack it out in the *real world* that you're so dead-set against this whole integration thing. No, you're petrified that, once you leave Inglewood, Tony Harris won't want to even keep in touch. And then your so-called friendship with him will be over. You don't want to leave Inglewood because you don't want to face the fact that you don't mean half as much to Tony as you wish you did."

Such a brutal, and probably accurate, exposure of her private motives and feelings hurt, and Tallia wanted to hurt back. "Well, at least *I'm* not in such a panic to get out of here that I'm ready to trash my independence and self-respect for the sake of trying to be *normal*, all because I can't handle the fact that I'm a *crip* and that's all I'll ever be!"

Although Jo-Anne's eyes were filled with hurt and anger, her voice was calm and detached. "I suppose I should thank you for putting me in touch with my real feelings and motives."

"Just returning the favour."

"Hey, no problem. What are friends for?" With a shaky but determined hand, she flicked on her power switch and turned her chair towards the door. "Oh, by the way, in case I forget in June, have a nice life." With that, she sped from the room.

Reeling from the quiet brutality of the exchange, Tallia buried her face in her hands and struggled desperately to hold back the tears. She really couldn't tell what hurt more - Jo-Anne's coldness and rejection, or the fact that she had ruthlessly exposed her great secret fear of leaving Inglewood and having Tony disappear from her life forever. Tallia knew full well that her wish to keep Tony in her life for the duration could never be justified as normal. It was the normal cycle for teachers to remain behind, becoming no more than fond but distant memories to their students as they go about the business of building their adult lives. Yet, she could not, would not, reconcile herself to the prospect of leaving Tony behind. She was convinced that the bond that she and Tony had forged between them went beyond the connection between a teacher and even a favourite student. He understood her and believed in her in a way that no one else ever would. And she could sense that, in some wonderfully inexplicable way, supporting her gave him a sense of fulfilment that nothing else could. Still, she could not shake the lingering worry that separation could weaken, perhaps even dissolve the bond between them. All of a sudden, her mind was paralysed by a thought that was even more frightening to her than life without Tony - Could it be that Jo-Anne had been right all along? Could she actually be *in love* with Tony?

But after a moment of initial panic, came the relief of rational self-examination. It was true that she did love him - for her to deny it would be as bad as Jo-Anne running away from Inglewood to try to become *normal*. But the love she felt for him wasn't the romantic obsession that Jo-Anne was so worried about; it was a feeling of mutual respect and emotional closeness born out of a deep and abiding friendship. It was this sense of loving and being loved that she was so desperate not to lose. Having already experienced the loss of Alex through death, and Jo-Anne through--she didn't know what, and harbouring the fear that Zachary and Greg would also be taken from her, the thought of having to sacrifice her relationship with Tony to what was considered the *normal* progression of life made her rebel against this constant cycle of change and loss from the depths of her soul. No matter what *normality* dictated, she would do all in her power to keep Tony in her life.

But then came another thought that paralysed her with fear. What if she was over-estimating how important she really was to Tony? Although his constant support of her writing and his very public pride in her accomplishments had long since made it obvious to everyone that she was indeed his favourite student, how could she be sure that he wanted to continue to be part of her life once that relationship ended, as she knew it must? Could it be that, come graduation day, Tony, having done his job, would send her off into the real world with a quick hug and a "Have a nice life"? Her heart wanted to assure her that such a scenario was simply impossible, but her mind, having just recorded the final collapse of her friendship with Jo-Anne, was not at all so comforting. And even if her heart was right in telling her that Tony would want to remain part of her life after she left Inglewood, how could she be sure that, once outside the security of Inglewood, she would not find that they were gradually drifting apart?

Tallia sat up, threw her head against the back of her chair, and heaved a great sigh. She knew that only time would answer her questions, and, at that moment, she wasn't at all sure that she wanted the answers. She recalled what Tony had told her, when Alex got sick at camp, about how knowing that you might be separated from the people that you care about just makes you more determined to make the most of every moment that you have with them. However it happened, she had lost Jo-Anne as a friend, and no one could tell her how long she would be able to hold on to Greg, or Zachary, or Connie, or Tony. All she could do was hold on to them as tightly as she could for as long as she could.

CHAPTER SEVEN - STOP THE PRESSES

"Are you sure you don't want to go back on the toilet and sit for a while? You've got fifteen minutes before your bus comes, and it'll probably be quite a long day for you."

"Nah, the bus might be early. Besides, I don't even feel like I might be able to go."

"I should have given you a suppository when you came home from your dinner with Connie last night - that's what I should have done. It's been *three days*, you know."

Tallia sighed, frustrated by the fact that, even after having reached the landmark of turning sixteen and thereby attaining `almost-adulthood,` she still had to suffer with having her bowel movements monitored. "*Believe me*, Mom, I know! But having a sup shoved into me right after filling up on pasta and cheesecake, and then sitting on the toilet for an hour wasn't exactly the finale I had in mind for my Sweet Sixteen!"

"I see your point!" chuckled Anna. "So, did you have a nice time with Connie at your birthday dinner last night?"

"Oh, yeah, I always have a good time with Connie. She's a real pal."

Anna hesitated slightly, evidently debating whether to bring up a potentially sore subject. "Speaking of pals, I was kind of surprised that we didn't hear from Jo-Anne yesterday. She always calls on your birthday."

"Yeah, well, things change."

"Are you sure there's no way for you two to patch up your differences? I've got a feeling that this rift is bothering you more than you want to admit."

"Of course it bothers me! I've watched all the sitcoms with the two faithful best friends who talk to each other endlessly on the phone, hang out together, sleep over at each other's house, and just generally help each other through the pitfalls of growing up. I always thought I would have all that with Jo-Anne; now, all of a sudden, I won't."

"Can't you two find a way to work things out? It seems to me that your friendship shouldn't have to end just because Jo-Anne left Inglewood."

"It's not *because* Jo-Anne's left Inglewood that our friendship's hit the skids, it's *why* she left. She made it very clear that she wants a *normal* life with *normal* friends, so that obviously puts me out of the picture."

"Did Jo-Anne really say that?"

"Oh, yeah! That's the whole reason she was in such a hurry to be integrated in the first place. She thinks Inglewood's a joke as a school because so few people actually finish high school. She also thinks that I'm a stupid coward for wanting to stay at Inglewood until I graduate." Tallia let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know, Mom. Do you think Jo-Anne could be partly right? Do you think I could be making a dumb move by resisting this whole push for integration?"

"Well, it is true that Inglewood does have its problems," said Anna. "But you've managed to do all right for yourself so far, and I think that's got a lot to do with the support systems in place at Inglewood. Getting through high school is going to be a long, tough road for you, even with that support. So I think it's probably wisest for you to stay put for the duration."

"I agree. But this integration thing is really picking up steam - more and more staff are getting on the bandwagon and pushing for more students to be integrated. What if I'm next on the list?"

"Has Ellen said anything to you about going out to a regular school?"

"No, not yet.--And it's not that I think Ellen would ever force me into something that I don't want to do.--It's just that sometimes I feel like there's this big wave coming at me, and, if I fight against it too hard, I'll drown."

"Well, change is painful, and sometimes fighting it can make it even more painful." Anna sighed. "As for this integration business, I guess the best advice I can give you is to make your feelings clear to people, but, at the same time, don't close your mind to other points of view. After all, from what I've seen, the staff at Inglewood generally does have your best interests at heart."

* * *

"I'm only doing this because I've got your best interests at heart."

"But Andrea, it's already quarter to nine. I'll be late for class."

"There's no reason it should take you fifteen minutes to do up your seatbelt, not if you put your mind to it. It's high time you learned to do things like this for yourself."

"I've already been trying for fifteen minutes - I just can't get the belt through the buckle. My arms are so sore and tired they're shaking already."

"Oh, all right, you can stop your whining. I'll do it." With an impatient sigh, she briskly walked over to where Tallia was sitting and roughly did up her seatbelt. "But you should realize that, unless you start learning to do more for yourself, you'll never be able to get out into the *real world* like Jo-Anne has."

Tallia was struck with the overwhelming desire to point out the fact that it was Jo-Anne's success in getting a full-time aide, rather than her mastery of any so-called `independent living skills,` that had secured her entrance into the *real world*. But before she could act on this desire, Andrea went on with her admonishing. "And look at you - you've been drooling again. Your front is all wet!--"

"It's because I've been bent over trying to do up my seatbelt. I always drool more when I have to physically struggle with something.--"

But Tallia's explanation was lost on Andrea, who simply went on with her lecture. "How do you ever expect to be accepted into a *normal* high school if you can't even control your drooling?"

"I don't."

Andrea pursed her narrow lips and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"I don't see why I should put myself through all the *normal* teenage `fitting in` crap that goes on in *normal* high school when I can stay here until I finish Grade Twelve."

"And what *then*? You can't stay hidden away here at Inglewood forever, you know. You've got to get out into the *real world* sometime! What are you going to do after high school?"

"I-I don't know.--Write.--Maybe go to university.--"

"University?--*You*!" Andrea let out a sarcastic laugh. "Well, I hate to burst your bubble, Tallia, but the chances of the professors at university accepting a student who doesn't do anything for herself, can't control her drooling, and, therefore, hasn't been able to make it into a regular high school are pretty slim. I suggest you think about that and adjust your attitude accordingly. Now, you'd better get moving or you'll be late for class."

* * *

"Witch!" Tallia muttered as she furiously raced into Ellen's classroom.

Admittedly, the audience for her dramatic entrance was slightly smaller than she could have hoped, for it consisted only of Greg. However, Greg made up for this by giving her entrance his rapt attention and then offering the desired response. "Andrea?"

"Who else?"

"What now?"

"Same song, new verse: Shape up, Tallia! Do more for yourself, Tallia! Stop drooling, Tallia! If you don't, you'll never get accepted by all those wonderful *normal* people in the *real world* like Jo-Anne did!"

"Call me nit-picky, but didn't all those wonderful *normal* people in the *real world* only agree to accept Jo-Anne if she came with an aide who'd do everything for her - including stuff she did on her own here?"

"True, but I've learned not to try to confuse Andrea with *facts* - it usually just prolongs the lecture!" She took a restless spin around the room. "You know, I used to dream about how *great* it would be to turn sixteen and go into high school. Well, look at me now! I've got the same Nazi-Nurse that I've had for the last two years, I've even got the same home-room teacher since they've combined Grades Eleven and Twelve, and moved Ellen up to Grade Ten."

"So what's wrong with Ellen all of a sudden?"

"Nothing's wrong with Ellen--I like Ellen--It's just that the things that *were* supposed to change *haven't*, and the things that *weren't* supposed to change *have*."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing, I seem to be starting high school minus a bbest friend"

"You didn't hear from Jo-Anne *at all* during the summer?"

"Nope - not even on my sixteenth birthday."

"Well, she probably just needs to get all that *normal* crap out of her system. Once she does, she'll come around."

"And that will happen when? Next century, maybe?"

"Okay, point taken," conceded Greg. "But with or without Jo-Anne around, you're going to have plenty of *positive* changes to keep yourself occupied this year."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

"What dynamic writing duo is a shoo-in for Co-Editorship of the *Insider*, especially now that Leslie Webster and Murray Neuman are being integrated?"

"Ever heard of winning by default?" Tallia deadpanned.

"Default, schmefault! Winning's winning! Just think of the things we've always wanted to do with the paper that we'll finally get to do. You could start that literary section you've always wanted, and I could get that expanded sports section."

Despite her present irritation with life in general, Tallia could not help but find Greg's enthusiasm about their potential co-editorship of the paper contagious. "Well, it's true, as co-editors, we would have the power to really revamp the paper. Maybe we could even use our clout to wrangle Zachary into starting that Super-Crip comic strip he's been talking about. He said he was going to work on it over the summer. Do you know if he did?"

"Well, I know he started doing some drafts when he got home from the family trip to Vancouver at the beginning of August, but I don't think he got too far with it."

"Artiste's block?" smiled Tallia.

Greg hesitated. "No--actually, Zachary's been kind of laid up with a cold for the past couple of weeks."

A too-familiar lump formed in the pit of Tallia's stomach, though she showed no outward discomposure. "So do you think he'll be able to make it in today?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Probably. He said he was feeling a lot better yesterday. Besides, you know Zack - the only way he'd miss the opening game of floor hockey season is if they chained him to his bed!"

Tallia let out a little laugh. "Yeah, just like Al--" She abruptly cut herself off, refusing to let her mind fully register all of the actual implications of that statement.

The ensuing moment of awkward silence was ended abruptly as Zachary sped into the room. "Witch!" he muttered under his breath.

Greg turned to Tallia. "Haven't we done this already?"

"Looks like Hag's really on a roll today!" Tallia sighed.

"All right, Contestant Number Two, let's hear *your* Hag Hagarth horror-story."

Muppet fan though he was, Zachary was apparently still too angry to appreciate Greg's Guy Smiley impression. Instead, he just went on fuming in a voice that was notably hoarse. "She actually threatened to send me home, just because I've got what's left of a little cold. She said that it was *irresponsible* of me to come to school today because I might still be *contagious*. Good thing Dave came over and got her off my back, otherwise I might have been forced to perform a public service and spaz out and take her out with my chair."

"But MDs don't spaz," said Tallia.

Zachary shrugged. "Details, details! Andrea's so worried about people being contagious - I could have told her I caught CP from you!"

Tallia laughed. "Knowing Andrea, she'd probably go along with it just so she'd have a reason to bawl me out." Looking more closely at Zachary, she suddenly realized that there was something very different about his face. "Hey, Zachary, what's that dark stuff on your upper lip? It looks like dirt or something."

"That's not *dirt*! I'm starting to grow a moustache."

"From what? An instant moustache-growing kit brought to you by the same people who brought the world the Chia-Pet?" heckled Greg.

"Har, har!" sneered Zachary. "And you call yourself a journalist! If you had any powers of observation at all, you'd see that there's already a finely-groomed layer of manly facial hair emerging above my upper lip. And, if you caught it with the light at the right angle, you could see that I'm working on the Clark Gable look." Unfortunately, Zachary's attempt to tilt his head so that the fluorescent lights overhead would illumine his small band of *manly facial hair* resulted in his neck muscles giving out and his head flopping backwards, making it difficult for him to breathe.

Tallia speedily negotiated her way through the row of desks that stood between her and Zachary, putting only a few dents in the side drawer of Zachary's desk on the way. Pulling up alongside him, she carefully slipped her left hand under his head and gently nudged it forward. Once upright, Zachary went into a prolonged coughing spasm. Though it was not uncommon for Zachary to have such coughing spasms, his cough was so much deeper than usual that Tallia was quite taken aback. "You know how much I hate to agree with Attila about anything--" she began hesitantly. "But that sounds like a pretty heavy-duty cough--maybe you should have hung out at home a little while longer, just to make sure you've really got this thing licked."

"I *said* I'm fine." With great effort, Zachary hefted his right hand onto his control box and drove towards his desk. Clearing his throat, he quickly changed the subject. "So I guess today's Jo-Anne's big debut as a *normal* student at a *normal* school. Anybody heard from her?"

Tallia let out a heavy sigh as she drove over to her desk. "Don't look at me, I haven't seen or heard from Jo-Anne since the last day of school. She didn't even call me on my birthday."

"Well well, looks like Jo-Anne's really made her break," said Zachary.

"Yup." Tallia glanced round the room and noticed Jo-Anne's typewriter sitting neglected on what used to be her desk. "I'd never have imagined it. -We've gone from the Fearless Five down to The Three Musketeers.--"

"You sure you don't mean The Three Stooges?" A sudden violent sneeze again caused Zachary's neck muscles to give out and his head to flop backwards. Noticing the problem at once, Tallia attempted to switch on her chair and drive over to help him, but she was hampered in her efforts by a muscle spasm in her arm.

"It's okay, Tallia, I've got it." Upon entering the room and seeing Zachary in distress, Ellen raced over to him, lifted up his head, and held it until the ensuing coughing spasm ended. "Are you all right now, Zachary?"

"Oh, yeah--" Zachary let out one last cough before regaining normal speech. "Just peachy!"

Ellen helped Zachary get positioned comfortably, lifting his limp arms up onto the desk and pushing his upper body slightly forward so that he could have more leverage in moving his arms. "I'm glad to see you here today. Andrea mentioned that you'd been ill."

"Andrea has a big mouth," muttered Zachary.

Ellen disguised a chuckle with a cough. "So you're feeling better?"

"Yeah, much better," he assured her briskly. "So, if the health quiz is over, don't we have some senior-high-type work to get to?"

"Indeed we have." Ellen walked over to her desk at the front of the room and picked up a notably thin pile of timetables, which she then began distributing to her small class. "Now, as you'll notice from these timetables, the first two periods each day will be English 10 taught by yours truly. But before we get started on our first unit on poetry, I want to take a couple of minutes to make some general announcements about changes we've made to the Senior High program this year due to the increasing number of students we expect will be going out to regular schools part-time and full-time during the course of the year."

Zachary drummed his fingers on his desk and rolled his eyes. "Let me guess. The School Board, in all its infinite wisdom, has decided to cut the funding for the high school program here because, hey, if you can't cut it out in the *real world*, you don't deserve that diploma anyway."

"Well, their approach hasn't been quite that brutal--at least not yet," Ellen sighed. "But the expected expansion of the integration is going to mean a shift in financial and human resources from Inglewood out into the community. And that means we're going to have to change the way we do some things around here."

"Like what?" Tallia asked anxiously.

"Well, for now, we're going to have to start having more combined classes for subjects like Biology, Social, and Typing."

Tallia shook her head in disbelief. "Great! As it was, I used to spend half of every typing class last year waiting for Mrs. Steadford to come put a new sheet of paper in my typewriter, and that was with just the four of us in class. How are we supposed to get through Typing 10 with a combined class?"

"Tsk, tsk." Zachary clicked his teeth admonishingly. "You still don't get it, do you, Tallia? Nobody's supposed to *`get through`* anything at Inglewood anymore. If I were you, I'd rethink the whole plan to stick it out here until you finish high school because it won't be long before there are only two kinds of students here - those who won't survive in the *real world*, and those of us who just plain won't survive. Quaint little place to go to school. - It'll be kind of a cross between a flophouse and death row."

Ellen simply could not bear to hear such brutal fatalism from one so young and with so much potential. "All right, Zachary, I think that's enough crystal ball gazing for today. We've got an English lesson to get to."

Zachary smiled cynically. "Good avoidance, Ellen! You *are* learning."

Thinking it best to ignore Zachary, Ellen took another small pile of handouts from her desk and began distributing them. "Now, the first poem that we're going to look at is--"

Zachary had awkwardly managed to flip over to the table of contents. "How about this one - *Because I Could Not Stop for* ***Death*** by Emily Dickinson. Maybe it could be our new school poem."

Ellen's mouth tightened. "Zachary, I told you to cool it."

Zachary let out a gasp of mock embarrassment. "Oops! - I just fouled up your whole avoidance bit, didn't I! So sorry!"

A sudden sneeze caused Zachary's neck muscles to give out again. Ellen quickly went to him and held his head while he went into another coughing spasm, this one much worse than the one before. By the time it was over, his face was flushed, his breathing was laboured, and Ellen was troubled. "Zachary, I think you'd better go down to the nursing office and have Dave check you out. -Maybe have a lie-down in the infirmary.--"

Zachary let out a faint but distinctly sarcastic laugh. "Have a *lie-down* in the infirmary? I thought they didn't have *nap-time* in high school!"

"You don't look well.--"

"I'm *fine*."

"Well, forgive me, but I think I want a second opinion on that."

"But this is stupid.--"

Unaccustomed as she was to being an authoritarian, Ellen was too worried about Zachary to back down. "Look, Zachary, I'm giving you a choice; either you go downstairs and get Dave to check you out, or I get Andrea to come up here and do it."

Flashes of anger and frustration darted from Zachary's eyes, yet he swung his arm over onto his control box and flicked on his power switch in sullen acquiescence. "Guess I'll see you later, *Mrs. Adams*," he muttered as he sped from the classroom.

Tallia and Greg, both lamenting their non-mediation of this flashpoint, exchanged helpless looks. Even more dismayed, Ellen put her book down on her desk and turned back to them. "Okay, let's have it. - You both think I've totally blown it with Zachary, don't you?"

Tallia and Greg again looked at each other as if consulting on who could offer the most convincing words of comfort. A sudden averting of Tallia's eyes was Greg's cue to take the initiative. "Look, Ellen, you've got to just try not to take this stuff personally. Zachary just gets this way sometimes--especially when he's been sick. He gets so mad at his body for copping out on him that he takes it out on people around him."

"And all the changes going on around here probably just make him feel even more weirded-out," added Tallia. "He probably feels totally left behind by all the changes, which likely makes him even more angry and defensive. In a way, I can kind of understand how he feels."

"So can I," Ellen assured them. "Believe me, I want to be as understanding and supportive of Zachary as I can. But I think Zachary needs to realize that he's not alone; he's surrounded by people who care about him. And he needs to understand that those people are having to deal with some of the same changes that he is, so they can't help but be affected by the way he reacts." Ellen sighed. "If there's one thing I've learned in the short time I've been at Inglewood, it's that it's impossible for anyone to exist in isolation here."

But Tallia knew, from her stormy relationship with Jo-Anne, that Ellen was wrong; it was indeed possible for someone to isolate themselves at Inglewood. With painful clarity, she could recall how, through single-minded determination, Jo-Anne had so managed to isolate herself at Inglewood that she ended up severing all the bonds she had to the school and the people in it. As she spent the first months of high school adjusting to the abnormalities of being co-editor with Greg of a paper that seemed to have an ever-shrinking staff and readership, and regularly playing mediator between an increasingly flummoxed Ellen and an increasingly testy Zachary, Tallia could not help but wonder how Jo-Anne was getting along in her new *normal* life.

But by the time the day that would bring Jo-Anne back to Inglewood finally came, Tallia had relegated all such speculations about her *normal* life in the *real world* to the very back of her mind, for the abnormalities of her own life had become far more pressing. On that day in late November, Tallia sat in English class hawkishly watching for any sign of neck-muscle-failure in Zachary, who had just returned from a four-week bout with a cold that had become a low-grade lung infection, and listening to Ellen read a poem by Emily Dickinson:

> My life closed twice before its close--
> It yet remains to see
> If Immortality reveal
> A third event to me.
>
> So huge, so hopeless to conceive
> As these that twice befell.
> Parting is all we know of heaven,
> And all we need of hell.

Ellen looked up from her book and noticed an intense look of concentration on Zachary's face. "Zachary, what do you think is the main idea that Emily Dickinson is trying to get across in this poem?"

Zachary looked down for an instant, seemingly embarrassed to have been discovered in his attentiveness. He spoke with pointed decisiveness, though his voice was notably weak. "Life sucks."

"Can you elaborate on that?"

"Self-explanatory, isn't it?"

Recognizing this as the start of another potentially volatile confrontation between Zachary and Ellen, Greg quickly jumped in. "She's talking about endings that happen in a person's life--the biggies, like death and stuff--and how it feels to suddenly be separated from people you really care about." He paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Actually, it probably took a lot of guts for her to write it."

"How so, Greg?" asked Ellen.

"Well, most people are really afraid of expressing their personal feelings about that kind of stuff because it makes them too vulnerable."

A devious glint suddenly animated Zachary's languid countenance. "*Or* she could be trying to fake out her readers by making them think she's being all deep and sincere when she's really just using words to manipulate how they think and feel."

Ellen seemed intrigued. "What makes you think that, Zachary?"

"Most people just can't take even sorting out their feelings about things like death for themselves - it's just too heavy," explained Zachary. "So putting it down on paper is just another way of distancing yourself from it. - It's just like trying to run away from the whole thing."

The sudden clunking and clattering of someone in a wheelchair at the classroom door provided a timely break in which Zachary could catch his breath while Ellen scurried to see who it was. "Well, Jo-Anne! How great to see you again. Come on in."

Three pairs of astonished eyes followed Jo-Anne into the room. None were wider than Tallia's; she couldn't believe that Jo-Anne had deigned to step out of her *normal* life long enough to return to Inglewood for any reason.

Zachary, it seems, couldn't believe it either. "Well, well, the Prodigal Crip returneth! Taking a break from life in the fast lane in the *real world* to visit us poor schmoes still stuck here in Nowhere-Land, are you?"

Jo-Anne drove up and parked in front of what used to be her desk. "Actually, I had to come to have a new backrest put in my chair down in Orthotics. So I just thought I'd drop by and say hi."

An awkward moment of silence followed. Since neither Zachary nor Tallia seemed disposed to making pleasant conversation, Greg took it upon himself to fill in the gap. "So how's life at Calder?" he asked in an amiable tone.

"Just great," Jo-Anne replied with an eager nod. "I've been meeting a lot of new people, making a lot of new friends."

Tallia rolled her eyes and began flipping through her English anthology.

"That's wonderful, Jo-Anne," smiled Ellen. "And how's your aide working out?"

Jo-Anne hesitated. "Well --actually, she quit two weeks ago--She found out she was pregnant and decided that she didn't want to do heavy stuff, like transferring me from my chair to the toilet, any more."

Ellen wrinkled her forehead in concern. "Oh no, Jo-Anne! Have they found a replacement?"

"No, not yet.--"

"So how are you managing?" Ellen asked quickly.

"Don't suppose that all your *new friends* are pitching in and helping you out, eh?" Zachary murmured wryly.

Jo-Anne wriggled uncomfortably in her chair. "No--I mean, some of 'em may *want to* help out, but it's against school policy because of potential law suits and stuff.--"

Her three former classmates exchanged looks of scepticism. "How convenient for them," Zachary muttered under his breath.

"They said that they expect to find a replacement any day now," Jo-Anne assured them.

But Ellen's mind wasn't at all eased by Jo-Anne's stoic surety. "Yes, but how are you managing *now*?"

Again, Jo-Anne hesitated. "Well, for *right now*, I'm only going to school half-days--that way, I don't have to worry about someone feeding me lunch and taking me to the bathroom."

Almost involuntarily, Tallia lowered her anthology onto her desk. She could well imagine the kind of physical and emotional upheaval that Jo-Anne must be going through. Her first, and strongest, impulse was to express her genuine sympathy and concern. She swallowed hard and racked her brain for an inoffensive way to begin.

But upon seeing Tallia raise her head as if she wanted to say something, Jo-Anne quickly turned and addressed Ellen. "And my guidance counsellor says I can make up whatever I fall behind in once I get my new aide."

Feeling rebuffed, Tallia again picked up her book. Although she was really concerned about Jo-Anne, she did not have the emotional energy to try again to break through her stubbornly-maintained defenses, especially when the scars from her last attempt to do so had not yet healed.

Ellen sighed. "I see."

"So, what's been happening around here?" Jo-Anne asked, briskly changing the subject.

"Well, Greg and Tallia are Co-Editors of the *Insider* this year. I think they're doing a very fine job--They've even got Zachary doing a regular comic strip."

"It's called The Misadventures of Super-Crip," Zachary announced triumphantly. "I'd give you an autographed copy of the latest issue for the Calder library, but it probably wouldn't go over real big with that new *normal* crowd you run with now - they just wouldn't appreciate the subtle humour of making buildings accessible by blowing them up."

Greg laughed. "Or the one you're working on for the Christmas issue, the one where Super-Crip applies for a job as Santa Claus and ends up suing the Santa's Union because the sleigh they provided wasn't accessible transportation. True comic genius, I say! But it just wouldn't be appreciated by those Philistines in the *normal* set."

Zachary raised his head proudly. "No, but that's okay, I'm a true *artiste*! I'd never sell out my art just to get commercial success. Besides, I'm just doing this comic strip gig to kill time until I can break into the big-time."

"What's that? TV cartoons?" Greg asked.

"Nah, that's old hat. I want to be an innovator, break into a whole new field - comic-strip obituaries!"

Jo-Anne shuddered. "Zachary! That's like totally warped and morbid!"

"Maybe, but it'd be a cool alternative to the measly little three paragraphs of ultra tiny print buried in the Announcements page," argued Zachary. "I know *I'd* rather be immortalized in a few tasteful frames, perhaps commemorating my creation of Super-Crip!"

Jo-Anne looked away in discomfort, but Greg found himself quite fascinated by the morbid absurdity of the subject. "But *you're* the one who's gonna create this total monopoly on comic-strip obituaries, so how can *you* be `immortalized in a few tasteful frames` if *you're* not around to do the immortalizing?"

Zachary frowned thoughtfully. "Good point ... Well then, I guess I'll just have to start with my own - yeah! It'll be a great way of getting some practice!"

Visibly annoyed, Jo-Anne fidgeted with her joystick, causing her chair to inch back and forth. "For crying out loud, Zachary, when will you quit being so *morbid*!"

"Oh, I don't know, Jo-Anne," drawled Zachary. "Maybe when you quit trying to be so *normal*." Instantaneously, his neck muscles gave out again, causing his head to flop backwards. Looking up from her book, Tallia watched anxiously as Ellen immediately scurried over to him, lifted up his head, and held it while he had another prolonged coughing spasm which left him gasping for breath. "Wow!--Maybe--I'd better--hurry up--and--get drawing!--"

"I think, for now, you'd better just relax and take some deep breaths," Ellen said, cautiously taking her hand out from behind his head. "You sure you're okay?"

"Oh yeah, just peachy!"

Jo-Anne wriggled uncomfortably in her chair and looked up nervously at the clock on the wall. "Well, I've got my bus coming soon, so I guess I'd better start heading out.--"

"Gee, I hope the almost-suffocating thing didn't make you too uncomfortable or anything," said Zachary. "I guess you're not used to stuff like that anymore."

"No sweat." Jo-Anne put her hand on her joystick and resolutely started toward the door. "See you guys." As she passed Tallia's desk, a spasm caused her to bump the side storage drawer. Startled, they both involuntarily looked up, their eyes locking in steely tension. "Sorry about that."

"No prob - happens here all the time." Tallia's tone was polite, but she did not smile.

And in an instant, Jo-Anne was gone. Tallia was suddenly tempted to regret her stubborn silence, for she registered a vague finality to the moment. No one could tell if and when the four of them would be together again; she really *should* have said something. And yet, what *could* she have said to get through to Jo-Anne that she hadn't already tried to say before? The moment was over - it was best to let it go and try to turn everyone's mind back to English by asking Ellen a penetrating question about Emily Dickinson's writing style.

* * *

Tallia looked down at the reflections of the fluorescent lights shimmering in front of her on the floor of the long narrow hallway that led to the library. She was again trying to outrun them. She had been so busy in these last three weeks before Christmas working on the December issues of the paper and the Newsletter, as well as helping arrange the Students' Union Christmas party that it felt like she hadn't spent any real time with Connie in ages. Here it was, the Monday before Christmas, and she and Connie still hadn't finalized plans for their annual holiday luncheon. Tallia had therefore made a point of coming in early so that she and Connie could talk.

Upon wheeling into the library, Tallia was pleasantly surprised to find Tony with Connie. "Well, if it isn't my two favourite staff members," she greeted them cheerily. "Don't tell me, Mr. H, you're hanging out here waiting for me to make sure I hand in that Newsletter article. Well, not to worry, on my way down here, I dropped it off with your secretary. I didn't know you'd be waiting for me."

Tony crossed in front of Connie's desk and stood beside Tallia. "You're right, Tallia, I did come here looking for you. But it's not the article--I needed to talk to you before you went to class."

"Okay, what's up?"

"I'm afraid it's Zachary--"

"Oh man, don't tell me he *still* hasn't gotten that budget for the Christmas party to you. I was after him all last week to get it to you, but he wasn't feeling well again, and he can be such a bear when he's sick--"

Tony took a deep breath. "That's just it, Tallia. Zachary got very sick over the weekend--" He hesitated as he put his hand on her shoulder.

The intense look of concern and compassion in his eyes startled Tallia; she knew something was very wrong. "Is Zachary in the hospital?" she asked quietly.

Tony took both her hands in his and sighed. "No, Sweetheart--Zachary was having a lot of trouble breathing last night. His parents took him to the hospital, but--"

Tallia's blood ran cold. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, her fingers clenched painfully around Tony's. "Oh God, *no*."

Tony gulped. "Tallia, Zachary died last night of respiratory failure."

Paralysed with shock, Tallia could not move or speak. She felt as though she had been thrust into some old black and white horror film where everything became shades of grainy grey and moved in slow-motion. She did not think she was crying, she wasn't making any sound, but her vision was blurred by what must have been tears as she watched Connie come round from behind her desk and put her arm around her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Tallia."

Suddenly she heard her own disjointed speech. "I thought for sure you were just gonna tell me he hadn't handed in that stupid budget--I mean, I know he's been sick off and on since September, but he was so stubborn about still coming to school and he always got so irritated when anybody brought it up that I guess we all just learned to ignore it and act like everything was normal ... This is *too weird*!--I mean, Alex was in the hospital for months and months before he--Zachary was here on Friday--" At last, one or two sobs broke from her. But she determinedly stifled them just as soon as she could, for this was no time for self-indulgence - there was too much that needed to be taken care of. "Greg and Ellen - Do they know yet?"

Tony shook his head, clearly marvelling at how Tallia simply accepted this newest burden added to a load that was already far too heavy for someone so young. Truly it seemed she was growing beyond him. "Dave was going to tell Greg when he came in; I told Ellen as soon as I got the call from Zachary's dad."

"How did she take it?"

"She was pretty shaken up."

"Well, I guess that's to be expected - she hasn't had the practice with this death stuff that the rest of us have." Tallia sighed wearily as she flicked on her power switch. "I'd better get to the room - there're probably tons of arrangements to be made for the memorial and stuff."

Tony put his hand on her shoulder. "Would you like me to come with you?"

Tallia flashed a weak smile as she reached up and patted his hand. "Thanks a lot, but I think I need to just drive down by myself and get a handle on what I'm going to say to Greg and Ellen."

Tony smiled and nodded. "I understand. But don't be surprised if I come by and check on you later on."

"Deal."

Connie took hold of Tallia's hand and gave it a squeeze. "And listen, why don't you stop by here at recess, I'll take my break early and we can go for coffee in the cafeteria."

"Thanks Connie, I'd like that."

As Tallia left the library, it occurred to her that the room she was leaving had suddenly ceased to be the safe haven she had always thought it to be, for it had now become the room where she found out that Zachary was dead. Perhaps there really was no such thing as a safe haven in the adult world; perhaps the best that a poor pilgrim soul could hope for in this world were a few true friends to provide some shelter from the harsh winds of change and loss, and the capacity, in turn, to try to shelter others. In that respect, Tallia knew she had to count herself lucky in spite of her losses.

Tallia reached the doorway of Ellen's classroom and paused. Inside, she could see Greg sitting alone, staring at Zachary's still-cluttered desk with the same blank expression that she was sure that she must have. She knew she had to go in and talk to him, though she had no idea what to say.

"Hey, Greg," she greeted him softly as she wheeled into the room.

Greg looked up. "You know?"

Tallia nodded. "Mr. H was waiting for me in the library when I came in this morning ... You found out from Dave?"

"Yup--I knew something really major had gone down when the first thing Dave said to me was, `Son, I'm afraid I've got bad news.`--You know it's *really* bad when he calls you *Son*."

Shakily, Tallia approached Zachary's desk. She spoke in a slow, quiet voice, almost oblivious to the fact that anyone was listening. "I think I'm still kind of half expecting to hear my clock radio go off, open my eyes and see that it's quarter to seven and that the last hour was just a bad dream."

"Neat idea - I wouldn't mind waking up myself anytime now." Greg sighed. "But it isn't gonna happen. This is *real.* - This is as real as it gets."

"I know." Tallia gulped. "But it's just so hard to wrap my brain around it. Just like that, Zachary's gone."

"We all knew it was gonna happen eventually--"

"Yeah, but it happened so fast - too fast."

"You know, I'm really starting to think it's better if it happens fast like this."

Tallia's eyes grew big. "*Better?* For who?"

"Everybody. The person doesn't have to spend his last few months on the planet being the subject of a death-watch, and his friends don't have to spend all that time hovering." Greg paused thoughtfully. "Zachary was actually really lucky to go so quick. That's the way I wanna go to."

"Greg!"

"What?"

"Must you be so morbid?"

"Zachary just *died* - can you think of a more *appropriate* occasion for morbidity?"

Tallia rolled her eyes.

"Besides, it doesn't take a PhD in statistics to figure out that there's a progression here. It's called the process of elimination - first Alex, now Zachary--it's obvious that *I'm* next."

"You don't *know* that! I could misjudge the length of a bus-lift and be history tomorrow."

"You're just saying that to cheer me up!"

In spite of herself, Tallia let out a sardonic laugh. "Well, maybe you could return the favour and put off planning your own memorial long enough to help me deal with Zachary's. A lot of that stuff will probably fall on us since Ellen's still a total rookie when it comes to planning memorials for her students."

"You're right," sighed Greg. "*We're* probably going to have to be the ones to help her cope with all of it."

"In which case, the poor woman's got more than her share of troubles!"

"Do you know whether anybody's told her yet?'

Tallia nodded. "Tony said he told her as soon as he got the call from Zachary's dad."

"How did she take it?"

"About like you'd expect - she's pretty shaken up."

"Figures. I don't suppose they offered Special Ed courses in how to handle students' croaking."

"So how do you think we should handle the situation?"

"The tried and true Inglewood strategy for grieving - hyper-arranging."

"That's as good a plan as any, I guess."

Just then, Ellen appeared in the classroom doorway. Tallia saw that she hesitated for a moment before coming in. "Greg, Tallia, I'm glad you're both here," she greeted them nervously. "Have you heard--the news?--"

"Yes, Ellen, we both know about Zachary," Greg said calmly. "It's all right."

"No Greg, it's anything but all right," sighed Ellen. "I just want you both to know how very, very sorry I am--This must be unbelievably hard on both of you."

"I think it's hard on everybody," said Tallia. "What we need to do right now is concentrate on trying to handle this the way Zachary would want us to."

Greg nodded in agreement. "Ellen, do you know if any arrangements have been made at all yet?"

"Yes actually, I've just come from Tony's office. We called Zachary's parents to find out what arrangements the family's made so that we can coordinate the school's arrangements with theirs." Ellen again sighed heavily. "The family's set the funeral for Thursday morning, so we've decided to have the school memorial on Thursday afternoon. We thought it best to move the Christmas party to Friday."

Greg let out a sardonic laugh. "Yeah, well, I guess having a Christmas party as the reception, or whatever it's called, for a funeral would be a little too gauche - even for this place. Although maybe, we could have put on Inglewood's own version of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, with the Grinch becoming a big blue personification of death--"

Knowing that Greg would regret this spontaneous flight into morbid sarcasm once he realized that it was probably making Ellen even more upset, Tallia abruptly cut him off. "Shouldn't we start thinking about what all *we* have to do to get things organized? It's usually the person's class that takes care of writing the eulogy for the memorial and stuff."

Ellen pulled up a chair and sat down beside them. "Well, unfortunately, I guess you guys have more experience with this kind of thing than I do. So maybe you should start giving me a list of things that we need to make sure get taken care of."

"Well, there's the eulogy for the school memorial," began Tallia. "Sometimes the family wants to use it for the funeral too."

Ellen nodded. "Actually, Mr. Collins did ask us to let him know if any one of Zachary's schoolmates wanted to write a tribute so that the family can incorporate it into the funeral service."

"I'll write the tribute," Greg said quietly.

Ellen reached out and gently patted his arm. "That'd be very nice, Greg. I'm sure that it'll mean an awful lot to Zachary's family."

"I think we should do something in the *Insider* too," he added thoughtfully. "Maybe we could put a tribute before Zachary's last `Super-Crip` strip."

"Good idea," said Tallia. "There's just one problem - the paper's already been put to bed, it's supposed to go to press later on today."

With great effort, Greg raised his shoulders in a feeble shrug. "So I guess one of us will have to go bursting into the Duplicating Department yelling `Stop the Presses!` like they do in the movies." He wrinkled his forehead. "You know, it's funny, one of the reasons I wanted to get into writing for the paper in the first place was because I always wanted to say that line someday. But when the guy in the movie said it, it was never because his best friend just died."

Greg's use of the words best friend set off an alarm in Tallia's mind. "Jo-Anne! Has anyone called her?"

"Oh, my gosh!" Ellen gasped. "I've been so concerned about you two that I didn't even think about Jo-Anne." She immediately jumped up, went to her briefcase, and started rummaging through its contents, murmuring, "I think I still have Calder's phone number in either my address book..." But suddenly, all of Ellen's furious activity abruptly stopped as she stood staring at a paper she now held in her hand. Instantly, she turned deathly pale and her eyes filled with tears.

"Ellen, what is it?" Greg asked, alarmed.

Ellen briskly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and cleared her throat. "This is Zachary's English essay on Emily Dickinson - I finished marking it late last night .... I made a point of staying up to finish marking it because it's the best work I've ever seen from him and I was really excited about giving it back to him this morning ... The irony is that, at the time I finished marking it last night, Zachary had already--" Ellen's voice broke off as tears again welled up in her eyes.

Tallia wriggled uncomfortably in her chair. She knew that if she did not do something to keep herself busy, she would also end up breaking down. "Look, why don't I go down to the students' phone room, look up the number in the phone book, and give Jo-Anne a call at Calder."

Ellen flashed a weak smile. "That's really sweet of you, Tallia. But I think it's really my job to--"

"I have a feeling that notifying people about the death of one of your students *wasn't* on the job description when you signed up," Tallia said wryly. "Okay, I know that Jo-Anne and I didn't exactly have a love-in the last time she was here. But we do have a whole lot of history between us, and that's why I kind of feel like it's my responsibility to do this."

Ellen nodded understandingly. "Well then, you go on to the phone room and make that call. Greg and I will carry on with planning the memorial."

"And remember, Tallia, all you've gotta do is tell it straight," said Greg. "That's all Zack would want."

Tallia nodded, turned, and drove out of the room.

Located just around the corner from the students' lunchroom, the phone room was in a part of the second floor that was absolutely deserted at this time of morning. Nevertheless, the first thing that Tallia did upon entering the room was to push the door shut with her wheelchair, even though she knew it would require a lengthy and laborious effort to open it again. It would be worth it to have this quiet, private space in which she could take a few deep breaths and collect her thoughts. Not that she spent too much time reflecting on what she was about to do; she knew that she could not afford to think too much about it lest she collapse under its weightiness. The key was to keep moving. So she briskly drove across the small room to a large table by the window. Sitting side by side on the table were a speaker phone and a phone book. As she parked at the table, she made a point of switching off her chair lest, when she opened the phone book, it accidently bumped the joystick and caused the chair to ram the table, which would most likely cause her to lose the phone book. It was vitally important to Tallia that she pull off this phone call totally on her own, so it was crucial for her to avoid any physical mishaps that would make it necessary for her to call in someone else for help. Very carefully, she slid the phone book to the edge of the table and opened it. A challenge for her at the best of times, the task of reading the small print in the phone book was made even more difficult by the fact that she had to peer between the dried tears which still stained her glasses. Nevertheless, after ten minutes of feverish concentration on controlling both her eye movements for reading and her arm movements for turning the flimsy pages of the phone book, she finally succeeded in locating the number for Calder.

"363-7856...363-7856." She repeated the number to herself as she pushed the phone book further onto the table. With a shaking left hand, she pushed the button that turned on the speaker phone and slowly began dialling. As she listened the line begin to ring, she was suddenly struck with the fear that she would not be able to make herself understood to a total stranger over the phone.

But before she could fix on the words that she would be able to pronounce most clearly, a woman answered the phone. "Calder Junior-Senior High School. Good morning."

"Hi, I'd li-k-ke to s-pea-k-k to Jo-Anne Ha--"

"I'm sorry, I can't understand what you're saying--"

"I need to tal-k-k to Jo--"

"Who do you need to talk to?"

Tallia could feel beads of sweat breaking out on her forehead as she strained every muscle in her body to get Jo-Anne's name out clearly. "Jo--Anne --Han--son."

"Jo-Anne Hanson?"

Tallia breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes."

"I'm sorry, Jo-Anne is in class right now. Can I take a message?"

"No--please--I need to talk to her.--One of--her old--class--mates --died."

A pause. "Did you say someone *died*?"

"Yes."

"One moment, I'll have her paged."

As Tallia waited, chills ran through her body. She had expended so much energy just getting Jo-Anne on the phone, she was worried she'd have little left when it came to actually telling her the news.

Finally, she heard the sound of someone picking up the receiver and holding it up to Jo-Anne's ear. Then came Jo-Anne's voice, "Hello?"

"Hi, Jo, it's me.--"

"Tallia, what's up? What's the idea calling me here and getting me out of class?" Jo-Anne's questions came out in a tone that was an odd mixture of annoyance and apprehension.

Tallia hesitated. "Jo--I'm afraid I've got really bad news."

Jo-Anne swallowed hard in an effort to dislodge the lump that had formed in her throat. "Well, what is it?"

"It's Zack. He's been sick off and on since September. He was at school on Friday, but he got really sick over the weekend, and--"

"Is he in the hospital?" Jo-Anne asked briskly.

"No, Jo-Anne, he's not in the hospital." Tallia sighed heavily. "He died last night of respiratory failure."

"Shit! Not again!" came the angry whisper. Then, stone cold silence.

Tallia could think of nothing to do but to continue delivering information. "They've got the arrangements made already - the funeral's on Thursday morning, and the school memorial's on Thursday afternoon."

"Both on Thursday?"

"Yeah."

Another hesitating silence. "I - I think there's gonna be a problem--"

"I know. You're probably worried about not having enough time to take Handi-Van home from the funeral, eat lunch, go to the bathroom, and get back here for the memorial. And you probably don't want to have to ask Andrea to help you," Tallia said quickly. "But look, I can talk to Ellen for you if you want. I'm sure she wouldn't mind giving you a hand."

"No, Tallia, that's not the problem."

"What is it then?"

"I--I--don't think--I'll be able to make it.--"

"To what? The funeral or the memorial?"

"... Either..."

Tallia was stunned and on the way to becoming angry. "Tell me I'm not hearing you right."

"Look, it's like this--I've got a new aide starting this week and my counsellor wants me to spend all week catching up on the essays and exam preparation that I got behind on while I was part-time. I just can't *afford* to take the whole day off."

"This isn't an invitation to a spur of the moment Christmas get-together Jo-Anne!" Tallia blurted out angrily. "This is about saying goodbye to Zachary. He's *dead*! You get it? Zachary's *dead*!"

"Believe me, I *get* it! I *get* that Zachary's dead! And I'm sorry - I'm *really, really* sorry! - But getting my counsellor all uptight by skipping out on Thursday isn't gonna help anything."

"And, of course, you wouldn't want to upset your precious counsellor and disrupt your perfect little *normal* life just for the sake of showing some support for Zachary's family, or, heaven forbid, Greg and me!"

"Look, Tallia, I'm *really sorry*, but I just *can't* ... Will you please just tell Greg ... *I'm sorry*."

"Sure. And I'm *sorry* too. - I'm *sorry* I bothered you." With her hand on the hang-up button, she added coldly, "Have a nice life, Jo. Goodbye."

Tallia pushed the hang-up button on the phone; the room filled with silence, and her heart filled with a fresh wave of grief, this one mixed with anger - anger at Zachary for abandoning her as well as abandoning his own stubborn defiance of his disease so suddenly, and anger at Jo-Anne for abandoning both her and Greg to deal with the reality of Zachary's death on their own. Knowing that allowing herself to dwell on this anger would probably cause her to again lose her fragile hold on her emotions, she decided to channel her energies into opening the door. Briskly driving up to the door, she got a firm hold of the latch-type knob with her right hand, and slowly started driving backwards, pulling the door open slightly. Unfortunately, while trying to get her foot inside the crack in order to push it open the rest of the way, a sudden spasm caused her to kick it shut again instead. This meant having to start the whole laborious procedure all over again. By the time she finally succeeded in getting the door open and gaining her freedom, the initial surge of anger had been physically worked off and replaced by a cold, dull ache.

Upon returning to Ellen's classroom, Tallia was surprised to find Greg alone at the typewriter, and Ellen nowhere in sight. "Where'd Ellen go?"

With great effort, Greg slid his hand across the keyboard to hit the return key. "She went to talk to Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Harris about who's gonna do what at the memorial. I suggested that she stop and grab a coffee on her way back - she looked like she could use it."

"Do you think Ellen's gonna be up to doing the homeroom teacher bit at the funeral and the memorial? She seemed pretty shaky this morning."

"I know," sighed Greg. "I think we're really gonna have to keep an eye on her and try to walk her through this whole thing as much as we can."

Tallia nodded. "You're right." She looked over at Zachary's still-cluttered desk and sadly shook her head. "But sometimes I wonder who's gonna walk *us* through it."

Greg let out an ironic laugh. "Us! Are you kidding? We've already been there and done it; we belong to the elite group of Inglewood Death Vets. Obviously, we can handle this totally on our own, without any help from anyone."

"Apparently, Jo-Anne agrees with you."

"What do you mean? Weren't you able to get through to her?"

"Depends on what you mean by *`getting through`*." With a heavy sigh, Tallia gave Greg a summary of her conversation with Jo-Anne, ending with her reaction to Jo-Anne's not wanting to upset her counsellor by *`skipping out`* on her for a whole day. "I got majorly ticked, and laid a big guilt trip on her about how, of course, she didn't care anymore about showing support to Zachary's family, or us. Then she got all wimpy and apologetic, but said she still just couldn't come. At that point, I got just plain furious. I apologized for *bothering* her, told her to have a nice life, and hung up."

Greg shook his head. "Wow!"

"Yeah, wow."

"I guess this means I should cross Jo-Anne off *my* list too."

Tallia wrinkled her forehead. "List? What list?"

"The Potential Mourners List for *my* funeral and memorial."

Tallia was very unimpressed. "Greg!"

"Well, let's face it, things aren't like they were in the Good Old Days when Adam Davis died."

Tallia grew wide-eyed. "The *Good Old Days*?"

"Yeah! Don't you remember when we were in Grade Six and got special permission to go to Adam's memorial and funeral because we had some classes with him for a couple of years before?" Greg's tone became distinctly nostalgic.

"When we went to Adam's memorial, the Music Room was just packed with wall-to-wall chairs."

"Yeah, so?"

"It's not gonna be like that for Zachary. With the number of people going out to regular schools half-days now, we'll be lucky if we can scrounge up any more than a dozen of Zack's grieving schoolmates for either the funeral or the memorial," Greg explained. "By the time *my* number comes up, *you* could be my lone grieving schoolmate."

Tallia groaned. "Gotta hand it to you, Greg! You've got a real talent for taking a totally depressing subject and making it even more depressing!"

Greg grinned. "Thanks! It's a gift!"

"Mind if we switch depressing subjects for a while?"

"Sure. Name your depressant of choice."

"Zachary's eulogy. How's it coming?"

"Not bad. I'm about half done."

"Already?"

Greg shrugged. "Once I got started, it just kind of came pouring out. I know that Zachary wouldn't want anything long and flowery, so I'm just keeping it short and simple. You can read what I've got so far."

Tallia drove up alongside the desk and leaned over to read the page in the typewriter. "When I think of Zachary Collins, I think of Super-Crip, the comic-strip character he created for our school newspaper..."

* * *

The pastor's voice boomed through speakers across the large church sanctuary as he read Greg's words. "Zachary once said that the way he wanted to be remembered was as the creator of Super-Crip. The more I think about it, the more appropriate it seems to remember Zachary in association with the disabled super-hero that he created. You see, Zachary and Super-Crip really had a lot in common. Super-Crip was known as a tireless warrior against injustice, who was not above blowing up obstacles like staircases or uncut curbs that got in his way. And while I can't recall Zachary ever actually resorting to using explosives, he was known for vaporizing any and all obstacles that got in his way with his brilliant mind, razor-sharp wit (which often took the form of pure, unadulterated sarcasm), and unfailing courage. One of the most important lessons I could ever learn I learned from Zachary; he taught me, by his own example, never to give in to, or be defeated by, my disability. Zachary was a fighter; he fought to live an active and productive life, insisting on continuing at school right up until the weekend he died. He was also a fiercely loyal friend who didn't mince words when he saw you taking a wrong turn. He was creative, he was funny, he was the best friend that I grew up with. To me, he *was* Super-Crip."

Tallia looked over at Greg, who was sitting beside her at the back of the church, flashed a weak smile, and gave him a quick pat an the arm. He acknowledged this gesture of support with a nod and a flickering smile.

"Before the final dedication and benediction, we would like to give you all an opportunity to say your personal goodbyes to Zachary," said the pastor. "As requested by the family, we will start at the back of the church with Zachary's schoolmates from Inglewood."

Being the one sitting on the aisle, it fell to Tallia to lead her schoolmates down the aisle to take their final leave of Zachary. As she turned on her chair and started driving towards what was arguably the most frightening yet profound moment of her life thus far, she was perturbed to find that the one prayer running through her mind was, *"Dear Lord, **please** don't let me spaz and take out Zachary's coffin!"*

With her wheelchair on its lowest possible speed, Tallia made her way to the front of the church and paused beside Zachary's open casket. The first thought that struck her was that this was the first time she could ever remember seeing Zachary in a suit. What an odd time for a first! The suit was dark blue, which only served to accentuate the strange pallor of his face and hands. This was the colour of death. The head that she had so often rescued from the torments of gravity and failing neck muscles now lay forever supported by a satin pillow. And beneath the prized Clark Gable moustache that he had managed to fully grow despite ever-encroaching illness, was a mouth that was formed into a reassuringly peaceful expression.

Tallia wanted to reach out and touch him one last time, but courage failed her. Instead, she leaned forward and whispered, "Rest well, Zack."

The next day saw the publication of the Christmas issue of the *Insider* containing Zachary's last instalment of "The Misadventures of Super-Crip" as well as Greg's tribute. Faced with the uniquely Inglewoodian dilemma of trying to reinfuse some semblance of Christmas Spirit into the issue without detracting from its focus on the school's loss of Zachary, Tallia printed the lyrics to Zachary's favourite song from the Muppets Christmas album as an epitaph:

The Season is upon us now,
The time for gifts and giving.
And as the year draws to its close,
I think about my living.

Now, Christmas-time when I was young
--The magic, and the wonder!--
But colours dull and candles dim,
And dark my standing-under.

O little angel, shining bright,
You set my soul to dreaming.
You've given back my joy and light,
And filled me with your meaning.

Saviour-King was born that day,
A baby, just like you.
And as the Wise-Men came with gifts,
I come with my gift too.

That peace on earth fill up your time,
And brotherhood surround you.
And you may know the warmth of love,
And wrap it all around you.

It's just a wish, a dream, I'm told,
From days when I was young.
Merry Christmas, little Zachary.
Merry Christmas, everyone.

Merry Christmas, my friend Zachary.
Merry Christmas, everyone.

CHAPTER EIGHT - EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

The familiarity of Ellen's classroom jarred Tallia as she made her solitary entrance into Grade Eleven. The large round discussion table continued to occupy the cente of the room. Jo-Anne's neglected typewriter still sat on the desk next to the one which was once Zachary's. The nervous excitement that Tallia had always felt at the prospect of being reunited with her classmates after two months spent in isolation at home behind her typewriter or in the camper with her family had now been replaced by a vague dread of the changes and losses that this school year promised.

The semester following Zachary's death had provided dramatic changes at Inglewood, changes that Tallia feared were leading up to the dissolution of the school in which she had grown up. In April, because of the steadily declining student population at the junior and senior high level, it became no longer feasible to have a traditional Students' Union. So now the Students' Union was to be replaced by a loosely-organized Student Interest Group. Even the future of the *Insider* had been left very much in doubt last June, though she and Greg had vowed to keep it going "no matter what." It certainly seemed as though the junior-senior high school program at Inglewood was winding down. Still, Tallia could not imagine finishing high school anywhere else. She and Greg were almost certainly the last high school grads the school would ever see, assuming that she stayed and he survived. And that unspoken assumption made being integrated at this late stage seem an act of betrayal, if only because Greg's MD prevented him from being integrated along with Tallia.

Tallia was startled by the clang of Greg's wheelchair scraping against the door as he drove into the classroom. "Hey, Tallia. How does it feel to be fifty percent of the entire Grade Eleven class?"

Tallia thought a moment. "Actually, totally weird and more than a little depressing. You?"

Greg raised his shoulders in a feeble shrug. "I suppose I might be weirded out and depressed too, if I sat around and thought about it. But fortunately, I've had more positive things to occupy my mind."

"Like what?"

"Like working out a strategy for how we're going to keep the *Insider* going."

"*That's* positive?" Tallia's hands shook as she waved them emphatically. "It was thinking about the fact that we *need* some miraculous strategy to save the *Insider* that got me weirded out and depressed in the first place."

"Your problem is that you're still comparing the way things are to they way they used to be." Greg moved closer to Tallia. "That just doesn't work. You focus too much on things you just can't change. The only hope we've got is to use what's left of the official high school as we knew it to keep the paper going."

"So what's this brilliant plan of yours?"

"Well, there's been talk about switching the high school students to correspondence courses because there are so few of us left and we're all at different levels," Greg began.

Tallia shuddered dramatically. "Taking the rest of high school by correspondence - now there's another nice, cheery thought! You figure maybe the correspondence school has its own newspaper and we can just start *mailing in* our submissions?"

"Not!" Greg wrinkled his forehead and narrowed his eyes as he customarily did before divulging a grand scheme. "Look, the whole focus of what's left of high school here is shifting towards individual study, right? So... Special Projects 20 has a provision for individual study, doesn't it?"

Tallia shrugged. "Yeah. So?"

"So we snag ourselves a staff supervisor and propose an individual project for two."

"Turn the paper into a two-person operation?" The option did not appeal to Tallia.

"What's the big deal? We were practically on our own by the end of last year anyway."

Tallia nodded. "You're right."

"Of course I'm right. Ellen will probably agree to be our supervisor in a heartbeat. And I can't imagine your good pal Harris vetoing the proposal. He'd go for anything that involved *you* writing. As long as you stick around, it'll be a breeze to get this paper going."

"What do you mean, as long as I stick around?" Tallia sounded a little defensive. "Where would I go?"

Greg shrugged. "You never know. At the rate this integration thing is picking up steam, you could be the next little sparrow to get shoved out of the nest."

"Oh, nice poetic imagery, Greg - I'm sure Ellen would be very impressed! The only thing is, if I'm a sparrow, I'm not just your garden variety sparrow, I'm a sparrow on wheels. If they try to shove me out of the nest before I'm ready to roll out on my own, I'm liable to dive-bomb some poor unsuspecting passer-by with my five-hundred-pound wheelchair!"

"Now ***there's*** a poetic image!" Greg laughed.

"You two talking poetic imagery before class? Very impressive!" Ellen looked suitably impressed as she entered the room.

"It's a tribute to your extraordinary talent as an English teacher," Greg responded in kind.

Ellen looked at him suspiciously. "Okay, why do I feel like I'm being set up for a major con-job here?"

"Because you are," Tallia came to the point.

"So what's the scam?"

"Well, Tallia and I were wondering if an exception could be made on the correspondence courses so that we could take Special Projects 20 together and get you to be our supervisor."

"It's the only way we can think of to keep the paper going," Tallia added quickly.

Ellen hesitated. "I can see that this is important to you two, but before we go rushing ahead with this, I need to talk to both of you about the way things are going to change around here this year."

Tallia sighed. "Like how this correspondence course stuff is going to work?"

"Well, I guess that's as good a place as any to start," said Ellen. "Mind if I sit while we talk about it?"

Tallia and Greg drove over to the large round table in the middle of the room. Taking her seat between her two students, Ellen hesitated before beginning to speak. "See guys, the thing is that taking courses by correspondence isn't exactly the same as taking courses in a classroom. An average correspondence course is usually twenty lessons, with about twenty to thirty pages of writing in each lesson."

"Oh, that's just *wonderful*!" Tallia thought she might cry. "It takes me four hours to type one page! How am I supposed to get through ten odd correspondence courses in two years?"

"Well, we could put you on an intensive year-round program, which would mean completing one or two correspondence courses each summer."

Tallia did not feel any better. "Great! So, if I *survive*, I graduate!"

Ellen nodded sympathetically. "Well, we could try to find a regular high school where you could go part-time and pick up some courses--"

"Like where? Calder!" scoffed Tallia. "No thanks! If I'm gonna finish high school at all, it'll be under my own steam, not with some lousy aide writing my answers for me!"

"Look, Tallia, maybe you shouldn't write off this whole integration thing," Greg began.

"Forget it, Greg. There's no way I'm putting myself through all the hassle of trying to decrippify myself enough to fit into a regular high school at this late stage just for the sake of a couple of measly courses. And, I'm not about to take off and leave you sitting around as the one remaining Inglewood senior."

"But I'm probably gonna start getting weaker soon - you're not," Greg's voice rose. "You've got choices that I don't have."

"Then I *choose* to stay here at Inglewood for the duration. It's as simple as that."

"Look, Tallia," Ellen put her hand on Tallia's arm. "I think it's only fair for you to know that the issue of integration is going to come up at your Inter-Departmental Program Meeting on Thursday, and there are some staff members who feel very strongly that you should start actively pursuing the possibility. And

I think it's in your best interest to listen to what they have to say with an open mind."

"Fine. I'll listen to what they have to say with an open mind at the stupid IDPM." Tallia paused before adding, "But there's still absolutely *no way* I'm going to a regular high school." Tallia's voice betrayed her anxiety.

* * *

"I wish everyone around here could just give me credit for knowing what's best for me, and not keep trying so hard to sell me on integration." Tallia looked defiantly at Connie as she braced her feet against the front of the circulation desk straightening her body in her chair in hopes of improving her lung capacity; it had been taxed by her attempt to relay the morning's developments as quickly as possible. "I mean, what's so terribly awful about me wanting to graduate from the school that my friends are in? What's so bad about me wanting to stay here with you, Greg, Ellen, Mr. Harris, and everybody else, until I graduate?"

"Nothing at all - it's perfectly natural," Connie was soothing. "But it's going to be awful slogging your way through the rest of high school by correspondence."

"I know. But could it be any worse than all the hassle of trying to become *normal* so that I can fit into a *normal* school, especially at this late stage?"

Connie shook her head. "I can't answer that for you, Tallia. You're going to have to come up with an answer to that one on your own."

"But the question is, will anyone even listen to the answer that I come up with for myself. I'm tired of having to try to convince people that I'm mature and together enough to take charge of my life. I just want to be able to do what I want, where I want, when I want!"

"Well, certainly no one can accuse you of not having well-defined goals!" Connie laughed. "Maybe you should use that point at your IDPM!"

Tallia's face broke into a grin. "Yeah! And maybe I should do it wearing my Miss Piggy costume from Hallowe'en! That way, I could always throw a few **HIYYAAs** at them!"

"That's just what you need right now." Jumping up from her desk, Connie headed for a nearby bookshelf and pulled out a big blue book. "Some words of wisdom from the Great Inspiration!"

Connie held the book up for Tallia to see. "*Miss Piggy's Guide to Life*! I love it! But somehow I doubt that she's got anything in there about the pros and cons of integration, or the pitfalls of IDPMs!"

"Maybe not, but I'm sure we can find something that's applicable ... What's the most predominant thought in your mind right now?"

"Basically, that I hate my life!"

"So you think Depression would cover it?"

"Guess so."

"Then here we have it!" Connie announced triumphantly. "How to Cope with What Makes You Mope!" She began reading in her most dramatic voice:

> "The basic trouble with depression is that it is so depressing. You see, even if you started out in a good mood, you would get gloomy if all you did was sit in a chair in your dressing room with the shades pulled down watching afternoon television. But when you are already in a lousy frame of mind, you just make yourself unhappier and unhappier, and the sadder you get, the less you feel like doing anything that would cheer you up. It is what psychiatrists call a fishous circle (I think they call it that because you feel the way goldfish must feel, going around in circles in those teensy bowls, looking at that stupid little castle all day and nibbling on stuff that looks like sawdust)."

Tallia let out a groan followed by a rueful laugh which Connie echoed as she continued to read:

> **"Your Blessing Census --**
> It often helps to look on the bright side. Make a teensy list of things that have not happened that really would be depressing if they had. Here is one of moi's:
>
> 1. I could have a dentist's appointment in one hour (not effective for depression caused by having a dentist's appointment in one hour).
> 2. Telephones have not been invented.
> 3. I could be shipwrecked on a desert island
> 4. without television,
> 5. with Gonzo.
> 6. I could have missed a sale on satin gloves."

Connie closed the book and turned to Tallia with an air of mock dignity. "So Tallia, have you been inspired by these words of wisdom?"

"Absolutely!" Tallia declared decisively. "I've definitely been inspired to either show up at my IDPM in my Miss Piggy costume, or just skip the whole thing all together, stay home with the shades pulled down and watch afternoon television. Thanks Connie, you helped me really put things into perspective!"

"Anytime!"

* * *

Tallia was in the middle of convincing her parents that integration was a bad idea when Travis appeared in the living room doorway. "Good, you're all here. Now, I can get it all over with at once."

"Get what over with?" Anna asked anxiously.

Travis took a deep breath. "Well, for starters, after four months of being an unemployed university graduate, I have finally succeeded in landing a full-time job as an accountant with the phone company!"

"That's wonderful, Son!" Jacob jumped up to pat Travis on the back.

"It sure is, Travis!" Anna chimed in. "When do you start?"

"Next week."

"Well, at least *one* Taves offspring will end up being gainfully employed! Great news, bro!"

Travis hesitated. "Actually, there's more--One of the Taves offspring is leaving the nest and getting his own place."

"Say what?"

Anna looked stunned. "We had no idea you were thinking about moving out."

"Well, I didn't want to go around broadcasting it till I had everything worked out," Travis sounded slightly nervous. "Last month, I went to look at this great little house for rent about a mile from here. I went back to look at it again after I got the job today; it was still available, so I took it. I can move in on the fifteenth."

Jacob took it upon himself to generate some enthusiasm for his son's announcement. "Why that's wonderful, Travis! Just think, you'll have your own little bachelor pad, and you'll still be close enough to home to come raid our refrigerator! Isn't that great, Anna? - Our son is ready to forge out on his own!"

"Yes--wonderful--" Anna murmured. "I'd best go start supper."

Travis' eyes followed his mother as she disappeared from the room. "What's the matter with Mom?"

"I think she's just suffering from the onset of Empty Nest Syndrome," Jacob turned towards the doorway. "I'll go talk to her. - I'm sure she'll come around."

Jacob headed for the kitchen. Travis turned back to Tallia with a thoughtful gaze. "And what's up with you, Squirt?"

Tallia shrugged innocently. "Nothing's up with me. Why? Should there be?"

"I guess I just figured that you'd be clamouring for dibs on my room. You've barely said a word. How come?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm suffering from Empty Nest Syndrome too."

"Don't tell me you're actually bummed about me moving out!"

"It's just that everything keeps changing on me, and I don't like it one bit," Tallia blurted out. "I mean, first Jo-Anne takes off and goes to Calder, then Zachary dies--Now, they're trying to get me to go to a regular high school, and you're moving out--I just feel like I keep on losing people--"

"Come on, Tallia, get a grip! I'm moving a whole entire *mile* away! Big deal! You can drive over in your chair in half an hour. Besides which, once I move, I'll probably end up being over here more than I am now. - After all, a guy's gotta eat and get his laundry done somewhere."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what got into me - I guess I underestimated your male ineptitude about trivial domestic matters like cooking and doing laundry!" Tallia gave up on extracting sympathy from Travis.

"Don't sweat it. Look at it this way - you're not losing a big brother, you're gaining a bigger room. And here's another profound bit of big brotherly wisdom for you," said Travis. "Don't get so uptight over this whole integration thing. Just decide what you really want to do, tell 'em, and go for it."

Tallia patted her brother on the shoulder. "Nice shot at profundity, Trav. But it's painfully evident that those are the words of one who has never experienced the horror of an Inglewood IDPM."

* * *

"Well, I'm calling it a day." With great effort, Greg closed the binder on his desk and lifted his hand onto his control box. "Man, this correspondence stuff is something else! I've filled in so many blanks in the last two days, I'm afraid I'm forgetting how to speak in complete sentences!"

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Tallia held down the return button on her typewriter to eject the current sheet of paper. "I've been typing at warp-speed all day, my arms are numb already, and I still only got three pages done." With shaky hands, she took the page from the carriage and carried it over to the binder that lay open beside the typewriter.

"Hey, it's already twenty to four. Shouldn't you be heading downstairs so you can take your mom to the conference room?"

"Mom said she could find her own way to the conference room." Tallia flipped through the pages in her binder. "Besides, before I go, I want to figure out this next section--"

"You're stalling."

"Am not." Tallia didn't look up.

After a moment's silence Greg's wheelchair moved closer. "Are too."

Tallia turned to face Greg. "So what if I am? I bet the people going to the Inquisition stalled too!"

"It might not be as bad as you think, you know. Mine wasn't. It was just your typical IDPM. You sit in a room for an hour, listening to fourteen different parents besides your own list all the `*problems*` in your life and then without once asking your opinion propose quick fixes."

Tallia chuckled. "Kinda like when we had Kangaroo Court at camp."

Greg nodded. "Exactly. And it deserves the same level of seriousness."

"That's easy for you to say. One of your `*problems*` wasn't integration. They figure it wouldn't be fair to uproot you from a place where you're comfortable. But because ! just have CP, I'm more durable, so it's perfectly fine to uproot me."

The words just came gushing out of her mouth. She had never meant to say them out loud, especially not to Greg. Cringing, she anticipated his reaction.

"Gee, I guess I'm just *too* lucky! Good thing I have MD and all." Greg said wryly.

"Look, I'm sorry. Don't pay any attention to me today. I'm all worked up over this stupid meeting."

"Speaking of which, don't you think you'd better get down there? It won't get off to a great start if you're late."

"You're right." Tallia sighed as she gathered up her books and stuffed them down beside her leg. "I'm off. See you tomorrow - I hope."

"Oh that'll get 'em, tiger!"

With the knot in her stomach growing larger by the minute, Tallia made her way to the conference room in the basement, just across from the main elevators. She found the executioners already assembled around a large table.

Her mother, Ellen, Andrea, Shaun Murphy, the Junior-Senior High Program Coordinator, and Janie Reid, the Occupational Therapist looked across at her.

"There you are, Tallia." Ellen jumped up and pulled out a chair. "You can pull in here."

Tallia took some comfort from the fact that there was a direct path to the door.

"We were wondering what was keeping you," Andrea opened the hostilities.

The nightmare was beginning. "I--I had a section in my Social correspondence that I wanted to get done--I'm not late, am I?"

"No, Tallia, actually you're right on time," Mr. Murphy interjected. "So, now that we're all here - Ellen, maybe you could start things off by reviewing Tallia's program to date and outlining her future program options."

"Sure." Ellen smiled. "Let me begin by saying that I think Tallia is doing incredibly well. She completed her Grade Ten requirements last June, and she's presently taking English 20, Social 20, and German 20 by correspondence, as well as taking Special Projects 20 with Greg Watson under my supervision." She paused. "The only real problem that I can foresee is that it will be very difficult for Tallia to finish high school by correspondence in two years. As I see it, our only options are either to put Tallia on an intensive year-round program or to try and find a high school where Tallia can pick up a few courses."

"Mrs. Taves, how do you feel about the possibility of Tallia taking courses at a regular high school?" asked Mr. Murphy.

"Well, certainly, I think the most important thing is for Tallia to finish high school--" Anna hesitated as she felt the weight of her daughter's gaze. "It's just that I'm not at all sure whether integration would be the right thing for Tallia. She is very comfortable here--"

"Yes, but we mustn't mollycoddle her," Andrea broke in. "All our students will have to get out into the *real world* sometime; the sooner they get out there and learn to cope on their own, the better off they'll be."

Uncomfortable with challenging a *professional*, even one as antagonistic towards her daughter as Andrea was, Anna's tone became less assertive. "All I meant to say was that Tallia needs an awful lot of physical support in order to function at school, and I'm not sure whether she could cope in a school where that level of support wasn't available."

"Well, we have had some success with getting aides for students who've gone out to regular schools," said Mr. Murphy. "Is that something that you might like us to look into for Tallia?"

"Possibly... I'm really not sure at this point--" Anna hesitated. "I want Tallia to finish high school, but I don't want her to take on a situation that she can't handle."

Tallia could no longer sit idly by and watch while other people prepared to make decisions about *her life*. "Why isn't anybody asking me what *I* think?" she blurted out. "After all, it is *my life* we're talking about here, right?"

Mr. Murphy nodded. "All right, Tallia. How do you feel?"

"I think it's a bad idea. There's no way I'm putting myself through all the hassle of trying to fit into a regular high school, just for the sake of a couple of measly courses. Besides, I seriously doubt if any teacher would take me on without a full-time aide, and that's *really* a bad idea."

"Why do you say that?" challenged Mr. Murphy. "We've been able to integrate other students with full-time aides."

"Yeah, like Jo-Anne Hanson, who keeps having to switch to going part-time every few months because her latest aide has quit!"

"Look, Tallia, I'm the first to admit that a full-time aide can be problematic," Ellen said calmly. "But frankly, given how much more difficult it would be for you to do this by correspondence, I think part-time integration might be your best hope of finishing high school."

Tallia's body stiffened and her mouth contorted as she strained to get the words out. "But--what if I--*want to*--stay here--and--work my butt off--to finish--high school--by correspondence?--What if--it's *worth it*--to me--to stick it out here--so that--I can--graduate--with Greg?"

Andrea shook her head. "Well, I think it's obvious that Tallia does not have her own best interests in mind. Our only option may be to make the decision for her."

Flashing Andrea a very angry look, Ellen turned to Tallia. "Just take a few deep breaths and maybe we can all work this out calmly--"

Tallia looked around the table; she couldn't see one person willing to give her unqualified support in what was becoming her fight to stay at Inglewood. Even her mother seemed utterly daunted by an entire room full of *professionals*, and by Tallia's determination to create a scene. Because her throat was tightening, Tallia's words came out at twice their normal volume. "What's to--work out?--You guys--might not--like the way--Andrea--said it,--but you all--agree,--don't you?--I'm being--too--irrational--too--*immature*--to be--allowed--to decide--whether or not--to be--integrated,--right?--So--there's really--no point--in me--sticking around,--is there?"

Tallia did not stop to think about the consequences. She just flicked her chair into high gear, and drove out of the conference room and into the waiting elevator. Once inside, she mechanically pushed "2", though she had no idea where she was going. She emerged from the elevator sobbing uncontrollably, half blinded by tears, but determined to find some spot where she could collect herself. As she drove blindly past Tony's office, he came out to see who was crying in the hallway.

"Tallia? Tallia, what's wrong?"

Awkwardly reaching behind her glasses and briskly wiping her eyes with her hand, Tallia turned to face him. "I--just--couldn't --" She fought to stifle her sobs.

Tony put his arm around her shoulder. "How 'bout if we go into my office and talk about whatever it is that's got you so upset?"

Tallia followed him into the office. She knew that Tony would hear about what happened at her IDPM very shortly, and she wanted him to hear her version first.

Tony closed the door and gave Tallia a tissue.

"Thanks," Tallia said quietly as she wiped her face.

"Feeling a little better now?" Tony asked gently.

Tallia nodded.

"Think we can talk about it?"

She nodded again. "I had my IDPM tonight."

"I see. And it didn't go so well, I take it."

In spite of herself, Tallia gave in to sarcasm. "Whatever gave you *that* idea?"

"Call it V.P.I. - Vice-Principal's Intuition." He smiled as he took her hand. "So, tell me, what happened?"

"Everybody started talking about *my options*. Silly person that I am, I thought that *I* would get a say in deciding which way *I* would go."

"I see. But you didn't?"

Tallia threw up her hands in frustration. "No, because, before I could get a word in edgewise, everybody had already decided that taking courses at a regular high school is the *only* way to go. And, before I know it, Mr. Murphy is asking my mother if they should look into getting me a full-time aide."

"So what did you do?"

"Well, for starters, I broke the first commandment of IDPMs - I spoke when not spoken to. Since it was *my life* that was under discussion, no one was asking *me* what *I* thought."

"Good for you! What happened then?"

"Mr. Murphy asked me how I felt about taking some courses at a regular high school, possibly with a full-time aide. So, I decided to present my position as clearly and as rationally as possible." She paused briefly to swallow and catch her breath. "I said that there's no way I'm putting myself through all the hassle of trying to fit into a regular high school at this late stage. You know, I realize it's really stupid for me to be envious of someone with MD. But I can't help it - it really bugs me that everybody's pressuring me about integration, but no one even *mentions* it to Greg ... It just doesn't seem fair."

"I guess it's really not fair - to either of you." Tony sighed. "Tallia, we've always been straight with each other, right?"

She nodded.

"So I want you to tell me, does the thought of going to a regular high school scare you? I know it would scare me, if I were in your shoes."

Tallia hesitated. "Yeah, I suppose it does scare me--I'd be lying if I said it didn't... But that's not really why I'm fighting this integration thing--There's no point in turning myself inside-out and abandoning Greg at this late stage because it won't end up making it any easier for me to finish high school. I know it'll be really tough to get through my courses by correspondence, but I *know* I'll do it - even if it means finishing off a couple of courses during the summer after I leave here."

"Fair enough--Have you given any thought to what you want to do after you finish high school?"

"Well, you know that I want to write ..." Tallia hesitated. "There was a time when I thought about going to university and taking English, but I guess that's pretty silly considering I'm not even trying to get myself into a regular high school."

The blue-grey eyes flashed. "Actually, Tallia, it might not be as silly as you think."

"What do you mean?"

"Integration isn't just happening in junior high and high schools, it's catching on in universities as well. I just read that our university has opened a Disabled Student Services Office. And the more I think about it, the more I think it might be the ideal part-time placement for you next year."

Tallia was caught in a strange mixture of confusion, excitement, and fear.

"The university has a program for what they call `Unclassified Students.` As an Unclassified Student, you could take one course at a time without having to meet the general admission requirements," explained Tony. "If you were to set aside your other courses for now, and concentrate on getting through English 20 and 30 by June, we just might be able to get you into a freshman English course next September."

"*Me?* At *University?* But there have only been like *two*, maybe *three* students in the *entire history* of Inglewood who have gone on to university. And their disabilities weren't as severe as mine--"

"But as I said, Tallia, things are changing out there. It's still a bit of a long shot, I know. But my money's on you any day."

Tallia took a deep breath. "Okay, suppose--just suppose--I give this freshman English thing a shot. How often would I have classes at the university?"

"Probably for about an hour a day, three days a week."

Tallia's mind was racing. Tony's plan would allow her to venture out into the *real world* without giving up the security of Inglewood. It would actually put her long-held dream of going to university and becoming a writer in her grasp. She would still be around for Greg if he needed her. And maybe, just maybe, by overlapping the end of her life at Inglewood with the beginning of her life at University, she'd have a better chance of making the cross-over while still hanging on to what was most precious to her - her friendship with Tony.

"So, what do you say, Tallia? Would you like me to run this little plan by Ellen and Company, and get the ball rolling?"

Tallia smiled nervously as she placed her hand as gently as possible on the one he held out to her. "Yeah. Let's go for it."

CHAPTER NINE - WHAT'S UP, DOC?

"Life would be so much simpler if we just didn't have to go to the bathroom!" Tallia muttered to herself as she drove into the empty elevator and pressed `2`. "Well, Attila did say she wouldn't be able to do me till quarter to, and I've *got* to get this stuff to Tony before he leaves ... If she decides to screw me up and take off on me again, I'll just have to keep quiet, cross my legs and hold it. The last thing I need today is to have another go-round with her over when I can and can't pee!"

The bemused look she caught from a passing porter as she drove out of the elevator made Tallia realize, much to her embarrassment, that he had probably caught her last sentence.

She drove up to Tony's office door and gave her customary knock--three kicks with her foot.

"Hey, Tallia. Come on in." Tony greeted her with a smile and closed the door behind her, walked round her chair and perched on the edge of his desk. "Well, tomorrow's the *big day*! How's my future honors university student feeling?"

"Nauseated."

"Now, don't tell me Inglewood's star writer is *nervous* about one *little* interview!"

"Nervous? Nah, I think *petrified* would be more accurate."

"Come on now, Tallia, your academic record is enviable, and your writing talent is extraordinary." Tony repeated the mantra for the umpteenth time that week, with no sign of tiring or waning enthusiasm. "They'd be *fools* not to welcome you with open arms!"

"Well then, do you think you could put that *completely unbiased* judgement to work and do me a favour?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"I was wondering if you'd have time to go through my writing portfolio and give me some idea of which pieces I should take to the interview with the Director of Disabled Student Services tomorrow?"

Tony smiled again. "You bet."

Tallia's arm went into spasm and three years' worth of her writing was scattered across the office floor.

Before Tallia had time to react, Tony was stooping to gather up the precious papers. "No problem - I've got it."

"And I spent *hours* last night putting that stuff in chronological order!" she groaned. "You know, I'm beginning to wonder if all this hassle is worth it."

Tony straightened and gave her a playful rap on the knee with the folder. "It will be - in about six years, when you graduate with distinction."

Tallia smirked smugly. "Is that your *objective* opinion?"

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Are you implying that there are times when I'm *less than objective*?"

"Come on, Tony," laughed Tallia. "You have to admit that you *do* tend to go overboard with the praise sometimes!"

"Like when?"

"How about last month, when that big-wig from the federal government was touring Inglewood? You told him that I could soon rival *Fotheringham* as a journalist!"

"So? You *could*!"

"And *Margaret Atwood* as a novelist?"

"Her too!"

Tallia threw up her hands in exasperation. "Why not *Shakespeare* as a playwright?"

With a thoughtful expression, Tony opened Tallia's writing portfolio and flipped through the pages. "Well, actually, his spelling was much better than yours, but he *did* lack your sparkling wit!"

Tallia shook her head. "Oh, Tony! ... I give up!"

All at once, Tony's expression became very serious. "No, you don't - you *never* give up on *anything! That's* how I *know* you've got a very long and very successful university career ahead of you!"

"How can you be *so sure*?"

Tony sat down on the edge of his desk and looked thoughtfully at her for a moment before beginning to speak. "I remember one time, a couple of months ago, when the computer was down and you had an article due for the newsletter. I went up to the classroom to check on how the writing was going--but when I saw how intensely you were working--I just couldn't bring myself to interrupt... You had just finished the page that was in the typewriter--you muttered something about one page in three hours being an improvement--and then you started struggling to get a new sheet of paper into the carriage. I tell you, those were the ten most painful minutes of my life! Every time you'd manage to get the sheet of paper onto the roller, your arm would jerk and the paper would wind up on the floor. I wanted so badly to play White Knight and just come charging in and put the paper in for you."

"Why didn't you?" Tallia asked.

"You had this look of intensity on your face, as though you were having your own private battle with Gravity, and if you didn't win it on your own, it would be a defeat. So I stood by and watched helplessly as page after page fell on the floor. Finally, you were down to your very last sheet of paper. I held my breath while you struggled to carry it up to the carriage and get it onto the roller. Then, you slowly moved your left hand onto the roller-knob and began to turn it. My heart stopped until I saw the paper come up in just the right position on the carriage." He reached out and took her hand. "I don't think I've ever been more proud of you than I was at that moment. With that kind of determination, Tallia, you can't do anything *but* succeed!"

"But I'm not *super-crip*, you know, Tony. I'm still just little Tallia Taves from Inglewood."

"Well, from what I've seen in the last twelve years, that's *more* than enough!"

Tallia bit her lip nervously. "I hope you're right about that."

Tony struck a dignified pose and responded in his most official tone, "I'm the *Vice-Principal*, remember? I'm *always right*!"

Tallia laughed and shook her head. "Oh, yeah. I almost forgot!"

She looked at her watch and grimaced. "I won't live to go to that interview tomorrow if I keep Attila waiting."

Tony patted her on the shoulder as he went to open the door. "Okay then, I'll get to work on your portfolio and you'd better get going. The last thing you need today is to get into a row with Attil--I mean, Andrea."

"It's probably already too late. As soon as I drive into the bathroom, she'll jump in on me and say..."

* * *

"You're late. I've been waiting for you for five minutes."

"This morning you said you wouldn't be able to do me till quarter to."

With a disdainful grunt, Andrea disengaged the motor on Tallia's wheelchair and began pushing it into position in the bathroom stall. "The meeting was postponed. Besides, you should have been in here getting yourself set up so it wouldn't take so long once I got here. You *know* I have Valarie's dialysis to do at twelve-thirty. I really wish you'd realize that you're not the *only person* in this school." She sighed, sounding frustrated. "So, where were you?"

Knowing Andrea's opposition to her university interview, Tallia opted for evasion. "Well--uh--I had a quick errand to run. I thought it would just take a minute."

"What errand?" demanded Andrea.

"I had to go drop something off for Ton--I mean, Mr. Harris--before he left for his afternoon School Board meeting."

"Oh, I get it," Andrea sneered sarcastically. "You were off playing *star student* with the *Vice-Principal* while *I'm* standing around in a *bathroom* waiting for you."

Agitated, Tallia reached up to push some stray hair away from her eyes when a sudden spasm caused her hand to jerk and accidently knock off her glasses. They fell to the floor but did not break. Andrea stood in stony silence, her gaze alternating between the glasses on the floor and Tallia.

"*You?* Going to university?" She laughed. "So what are you going to do when you get all irate and pouty like a little girl and knock your glasses off *there? I* won't be around to pick them up for you, and neither will your *precious Tony*. It would be best for you if you faced facts now, Dear. You're far too dependent and immature to make it out there--you're always going to need someone to look after you."

"That's just the physical stuff," protested Tallia. "University's about developing your mind, not your body."

"Come on, Tallia, even you can't be that naive! You've resisted being integrated into a regular high school because you don't really want to start doing things for yourself, but now you suddenly want to take on university? Do you think the professors at university are going to have time or even be willing to take your jacket off when you come in, or pick up your books when you drop them, or wipe your chin when you drool?"

"If going to university is so impossible, why do Mr. Harris and Ellen keep telling me I can do it?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say it, but maybe I'm the only one in this school who cares enough to really tell it like it is." With an impatient sigh Andrea picked up the glasses and put them back on Tallia's face. "Now, let's hurry up and get you toileted. I'm running late."

A sudden and severe pain hit Tallia's abdomen as Andrea transferred her onto the toilet. "Actually, Andrea, I wonder if maybe you could go feed Stephanie and let me sit for a while," she requested meekly. "I think I need to have a B.M."

"Oh, that's just *wonderful*!" Andrea threw up her hands in exasperation. "And *when* are you expecting me to feed *you* lunch?"

"I don't really want lunch.--I'm not feeling too well."

"Oh, all right, I'll give you ten minutes," Andrea said sternly as she turned to leave. "But you should think about what I said before - you're far too dependent to ever cope at university. Who's going to help you with things like this there?"

Tallia was left alone painfully struggling to dislodge the great sharp mass from her bowels and Andrea's even sharper words from her mind. She tried to tell herself that Andrea was just trying to convince Tallia she needed her. But that strategy remained ineffective because the fact was that she *did* need Andrea. She was bound to her by the Law of Gravity which makes people trapped in wheelchairs totally dependent those who aren't. It was so humiliating to have to rely on someone who had absolutely no respect for her to help her with something as basic and necessary as going to the bathroom! Tallia couldn't get away from Andrea or someone like her any more than she could get away from this stupid spastic body she was trapped in! What if Andrea was right? What if she couldn't make it?

Tallia, you don't have time for this, she told herself sternly. *Attila will be back right away, and Greg's probably in the classroom waiting for you already. So get on with it --**PUSH!**"*

* * *

Driving erratically, Tallia hurriedly crashed her way into Ellen's classroom, where she found Greg sitting in front of the computer, drumming his fingers on the keyboard impatiently, if feebly.

"Hi, Greg. Sorry I'm so late."

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to make it at all," came the almost sulky response.

"Actually, so was I, thanks to my ever-loving nurse."

Greg's grim face brightened. "Oh-oh! Trouble in purgatory?"

"No," sighed Tallia. "It's definitely a step *down* from purgatory!"

"So which one of Andrea's ten-thousand and one commandments did you break this time?"

"Thou shalt not ever have to spend more than a total of ten minutes on the can!" Tallia pronounced solemnly. "The woman's supposedly a nurse for crying out loud--you'd think she'd be able to grasp the concept of constipation."

Greg shook his head. "Good old Attila ... Shit!"

"Tell me about it!" She sighed as she pulled up closer to the desk. "So how far have you gotten?"

"Not very far," he said, motioning towards the turned-off computer.

"Wasn't Ellen here when you came in?"

"Yeah, for a minute."

"Well, why didn't you get her to set you up? I *told* you to go ahead and start without me if I wasn't here."

"Yeah, you did. But the funny thing about these nifty new computers is that they don't work unless you have the right little disc to slide into the drive."

A cold wave of dread swept over Tallia as she looked down at the clipboard that was wedged in beside her in the chair. "The *Insider* disc! Oh, man - I took it with me, didn't I!" she groaned as she got out the clipboard, opened it, and found the disc.

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock!"

"Okay, okay. Just give me a minute to put the clipboard on my desk and get the disc out," she murmured as she drove over to her desk, carefully clutching the clipboard.

"Well now, don't spaz out. If you drop it, the rest of our noon-hour will be shot."

Greg's mention of the word "spaz" was sufficient to prompt her arm to suddenly jerk, almost causing her to drop the clipboard. She cast a sharp look of disapproval towards him as she lifted the clipboard onto the desk and opened it.

"There you go again! You MDs will never get it, will you! Telling someone with CP not to spaz has the same effect as suddenly running five thousand volts through their muscles."

"Wouldn't bother ME!"

"Har, har! Very funny, Mr. Limp-limbs!" sneered Tallia. "Just remember that you *need* my marvellously mobile muscles to get anything done here today."

"Okay, okay, Miss Marvellously Mobile Muscles, quit crowin' and come put the disc in the computer."

"Don't sweat it, I'm comin' ...." She very carefully put the disc on her lap and drove over to the computer. "There, now, I just flip up the latch on the drive, get a firm grip on the end of the disc ... and just slide it into the --" But just when triumph seemed in her grasp, the heavy hand of Gravity weighed in upon her, and she broke out in a cold sweat. "Darn, it's slipping from between my fingers! ... No, don't fall!--DON'T!--"

After several moments of careful study, Greg put forth his analysis of the situation. "It fell."

For a moment, Tallia just glared at Greg. Then she turned back to the disc on the floor and groaned. "Oh, man! I don't *believe* this!"

"Why not? Seems to be par for the course."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" she snapped.

"Just that you've been more than a little spazzed-out lately," he said.

"Well, you'd be spazzed-out too if you had to --"

"If I had to what?"

"Nothing--just having to deal with Andrea and stuff--" She heaved a great sigh.

Greg looked down at the disc in silence for a moment, and then slowly began to speak. "Well, so much for including this issue in our entry package for the National High School Newspaper Competition. The package has to be in the mail by the end of the week.--We'll never make it."

"I know," Tallia said quietly. "And Tony said that piece we did on what it's like taking high school by correspondence was the best thing we've done this year."

"Yeah, Ellen was really impressed with it too. She said it would be good to get it into a public forum by including it in our entry package because it would give non-disabled people a good idea of what life at Inglewood is like these days."

Tallia put her hand on her joystick and turned her chair towards his chair slightly. "That does it. It's time to take decisive action."

Greg raised his eyebrows. "And what, pray tell, is decisive action?"

"Watch and be amazed!" Tallia crowed as she put her brain-wave into action. "I just toodle on over to the blackboard ... Pick up this handy-dandy yard-stick ..."

"Metre-stick."

"Oh, you and your piddly little details. Fine, I pick up this handy-dandy *metre-stick* ..." Tallia continued, providing a play-by-play commentary. "Drive over to where the disc is lying on the floor ... Carefully let the end of the stick down into the hole in the middle of the disc ... Slip it underneath the disc ... Lift up the disc with the stick ..."

Greg coached her along. "You got it! It's coming! Take it easy now ... Don't bring the metre stick up too fast ... Try to bring it up all along the leg of the desk so it won't fall off ... Careful now ... Careful ..."

"I got it to slide down the metre-stick!" she exclaimed with breathless excitement. "Now I just have to take it off the end of the stick ... and ... shit!"

Greg looked down and sighed. "Well, Super-Crip, you gave it your best shot."

Tallia could only stare at the floor and shake her head. "One cruddy spasm and I lose both the disc and the ruler! ... Just one cruddy spasm."

"Ain't life grand."

"Shit! I hate gravity! ... Do you realize how much of our lives we've wasted just trying to pick up stuff, or waiting for somebody else to do it?"

"More than we can afford ..." Greg said slowly. "Definitely, more than we can afford."

Suddenly, Greg's neck muscles gave out. His head flopped backwards, making it difficult for him to breathe. "Oh-oh--looks like--Gravity--strikes again! -- "

Tallia rolled over to Greg and gently pushed his head forward. Once upright, Greg went into a coughing spasm that lasted several moments before subsiding. Even after the coughing stopped, his voice remained hoarse. "Thanks for the lift!"

"Any time! ... Man, I've sure been spending a lot of time saving your neck from Gravity lately."

"Yeah, well I'm just a little worn out." Greg shrugged. "Guess you could say Gravity's been getting me *down*!"

Tallia groaned and shook her head.

Greg looked down at the disc on the floor again and sighed. "So how do you want to handle this paper situation?"

"Well, I've got all the contest stuff laid out on my desk. Maybe if we use this time to get all that organized, we can use spare period this afternoon to finish off the paper."

"Sounds like a plan." He hefted his hand back onto his control box and followed Tallia to her desk.

Very carefully, Tallia took a bulging folder from the side of her desk and opened it. She looked up. "Who knows - we might just have a shot."

"A shot? We've got more than a shot!" Greg's features became animated. "This is a darn fine little newspaper we've got here! We could well end up co-editors of one of the top ten high school newspapers in the country."

"That *would* be somethin', wouldn't it."

"It might make it that much harder to shut the whole thing down in June.--"

"Nobody's said anything about not being able to keep the paper going next year," Tallia responded. "Besides, Ellen's already said that it'll most likely end up being our decision."

"There won't be much to decide if the university lets you take that course next year. Even *you* won't be able to juggle editing with taking classes there. And, as good as I am, there's no way I could take on the whole paper by myself."

"This university bit is hardly a sure thing, you know - I wish everybody would stop acting like it is. And you have as much right to go for this unclassified student thing as I do," she replied in a decisive tone.

Greg rolled his eyes. "Oh, no. Here we go again!"

"You can still change your mind about coming along to the university tomorrow. I'm sure that Ellen would be *thrilled* if you did."

"Come on, Tal, this is gonna be your shining moment, your entry into the big league - you don't want *me* tagging along."

"Why not?" challenged Tallia. "Why can't this be *your* entry into the big league too? We've been the two keeners ever since Grade One. We're not like most of the other students who just seem to fall through the cracks because they don't happen to be academically inclined. Most of 'em will end up sitting at home watching TV all day after they graduate. But you and me--just maybe we could have a real future out there."

"You're forgetting one *minor* detail, Keemosaby."

"Which is?"

"*You*, CP,*Me*, MD!"

"So?"

Greg rolled his eyes. "What, Miss Journalism Major, you want me to spell it out for you in ABC's?--Fine. FACT A: It would probably take me about six years to finish my Bachelor's Degree too. FACT B: I currently have a life expectancy of three to four more years. FACT C: By the time *you* convocate, *I'll* be gainfully employed as compost."

"You don't *know* that!" Tallia argued vehemently. "No one *knows* that but God."

"True, but He does give some of us some pretty *clear hints*."

"Yeah, but you can't just *assume*.--I mean, there have been plenty of people who made it to twenty-five - even thirty."

"Name me five," came the challenge.

Tallia thought for a few moments. "Well, um, there was Kevin Rimbey - he made it to twenty-eight."

"Yeah, but he spent every other month in the hospital during his last four years. So he really only *had* twenty-four," Greg fired back.

"Okay ... but there was Steve Lamont - he was twenty-five."

"Just barely! And he was unconscious for weeks before he finally died."

Tallia threw up her hands in frustration. "Well, what about Peter ... What's-His-Face? He was up there, wasn't he?"

"Kowalsky? Not that far - he was a month away from twenty-five, and he hadn't been able to sit up for six months."

Tallia squirmed uncomfortably in her wheelchair. "Well ... There *must* be others ..."

"Give up?" taunted Greg.

"On this dumb name-game? - Yes! On *you*? - Not a chance! You've been healthy this year - I don't see what the harm would be in checking out your options."

"This is *good*! Now you're starting to adapt Ellen's lines for use on me! **Reality-check time!** Can't you just hear the *dandy* excuses I'd have for not getting my papers in on time - `Sorry I'm four months late with this term-paper, Dr. Jones, but I've spent three-quarters of the term in the hospital with a bad cold!`"

"But it's not necessarily gonna be like that," Tallia spoke earnestly. "I don't see what the harm would be in coming along tomorrow and just seeing what happens."

"Look, if you *must* know, I happen to have a previous engagement tomorrow morning."

Tallia folded her arms. "With whom? Kermit the half-dissected frog in the science lab?"

Greg adopted a playful tone. "No, with Dr. McGovern, the half-balding physician at the clinic."

Tallia leaned forward. "Since when?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday? Why is this the first I've heard of it?" she demanded.

"It just never came up," Greg offered feebly.

Tallia was unimpressed. "Greg!"

"Well, I didn't *quite* know how to work it in between dealing with all this *Insider* stuff and helping Ellen give you pep-talks about tomorrow!"

There was a long pause.

"McGovern's your respiratory guy, isn't he?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah."

"You're not sick, are you?"

"Well ... not exactly ..."

"Come on, Greg, I'm not *dense*! I've been around here long enough to know the drill. - Guys with MD, especially white-coat-haters like you, *do not* go to respiratory specialists just to have a routine check-up."

Greg shook his head. "Man, a guy can't put *anything* past you, can he!"

"And *don't you forget it!*" she said sternly. "So, let's have it, what's wrong? - I know you've been a little tired lately, but your lungs aren't congested or anything."

Greg hesitated. "It's mostly in the morning when I first wake up. Yesterday I coughed up a bit of pus."

Tallia's heart sank. This was beginning to sound all too familiar. "Oh, man!" she groaned.

Greg did his best to play down the seriousness of the situation. "Now don't go freaking out on me - that's exactly why I didn't want to tell you till everything was over with tomorrow ... It's probably nothing."

"*Nothing?* Just maybe the beginning of a lung infection, for crying out loud!"

"But it probably isn't."

Tallia threw up her hands. "*Probably!* Oh, this is just *great!*" She gave him a severe look. "Should you even be here?"

"I go to school here," he retorted wryly.

Tallia shook her head.

Greg sighed. "Look, I wasn't going to leave you stranded with an issue to be put to bed."

"I could handle it, you know--"

"Yeah, maybe. But I really wanted to see this contest thing through," Greg explained. "Competing against a bunch of *normal* high school papers and possibly winning may be my one shot at being a **trail-blazer** like you and Jo-Anne."

"Well, *I* won't be much of a **trail-blazer** if the university doesn't accept me. And, as for Jo-Anne, word has it that her days as a **trail-blazer** have come to a rather inauspicious end."

"What are you talking about?" Greg asked in surprise.

"My mom got a phone call from Jo-Anne's mom yesterday. Mrs. Hanson was all freaked out because it seems that Jo-Anne finally got fed up with her aides quitting on her and being ping-ponged back and forth between being full-time and part-time, so she just up and quit."

"Jo-Anne dropped out of Calder!" Greg gasped. "What do her parents say?"

"There's not much they *can* say. Jo-Anne's eighteen now."

"So what's she doing?"

"According to Mrs. Hanson, she's sitting at home watching soap operas all day. Her mom's really worried. She says Jo-Anne won't even talk about taking correspondence or any kind of upgrading program. Apparently, Jo-Anne never really made any friends at Calder, so she's totally isolated now. The reason Mrs. Hanson called my mom was to ask her to ask me to call Jo-Anne and try to talk to her about it."

"So are you going to call her?"

Tallia shrugged. "I don't know what good it would do. We never saw eye-to-eye on this integration thing in the first place. That's when our whole friendship started to unravel. If I called her now, she'd probably just think I wanted to gloat."

"Or maybe she'd realize that you really do care about her."

"I don't know," Tallia took a restless spin around the room. "I don't even know if I have enough energy to deal with Jo-Anne and her problems when I can barely figure out my own life with everything that's going on right now."

"You mean with the *Insider* and the university?"

"And with Tony. He's been so supportive through all this university stuff. I don't think anyone else who comes into my life will ever believe in me quite the way he does ... I feel so close to Tony right now, but what if that connection just evaporates once I leave here? What if he doesn't really want to keep the friendship going after I leave school? I can't stand thinking that there might come a day when we'll just be ex-student and ex-teacher."

"Well, have you ever talked to him about any of this?"

"Dozens of times - in my head!" Tallia sighed. "But when I'm with him, the words just won't come. And then I think it'd really just be like putting a gun to his head, so what's the point? Tony's got too much class to come out and tell me that he doesn't want to keep in touch after I leave Inglewood, even if that is how he feels."

"But you guys aren't just student and teacher now, you're good friends. That kind of connection's for real, it doesn't just evaporate," Greg said firmly. "You shouldn't assume the worst about what other people think or feel--not with Tony, and not with Jo-Anne. After all, she was your best friend."

"Best friend ... Was she? ... Jo-Anne and I, we threw those words around, but I don't think either of us understood what they really meant ... A best friend accepts you for who you are--Jo-Anne and I spent half our time trying to change each other. I couldn't understand why she fought to leave Inglewood, and she couldn't understand why I fought to stay. If I had tried to have the conversation that I just had with you about me and Tony with Jo-Anne, she would either have accused me of being a Teacher's Pet and *abnormal*, or she would have insisted that I have a crush on him."

"Well, I must admit, there was a time when I probably would have done the same thing. But, fortunately for you, having Ellen around as my very own mentor has mellowed and matured me considerably!" Greg smiled. "Who knows, maybe if you give Jo-Anne a call, you might find that she's mellowed and matured too."

"I'll think about it," murmured Tallia.

"Hi, guys. How goes the co-editing?" Ellen greeted them cheerily as she entered the room.

"It doesn't," sulked Tallia.

"How come?"

Greg's eyes flashed. "We're suffering from Gravitatus Interruptus."

Ellen wrinkled her forehead. "Huh?"

"What my verbose friend here is trying to tell you is that we haven't been able to get any work done on the paper because the disc with all our work on it fell on the floor."

"That's what I said - Gravitatus Interruptus!"

"How frustrating for you." Ellen joined them at the idle computer. "I'm sorry - I was going to come back up here earlier and check on you guys, but I got tied up."

"It's okay," sighed Tallia. "We would have been just fine up here, if it hadn't been for that stupid disc--"

"And good old gravity!"

"Well, I guess it just goes to prove what I always say--If you can't pick it up, *don't drop it*" With almost obscene ease, Ellen bent down, picked up the disc, and slid in into the drive.

Greg rolled his eyes. "Now, why didn't *we* think of that!"

* * *

Tallia and Greg spent recess negotiating a twenty-four hour postponement in printing the paper. When they got back to the classroom, they found Ellen engaged in a rather intense phone conversation.

"So I'll see if we can get Tallia's bus booking changed and get back to you ... Yes, I realize that there are no guarantees, and I'll explain that to Tallia--it's just unfortunate that this decision had to come down now ... "

Ellen was wrapping up the call. "Yes, I'll call you as soon as I know ... Yes ... Thank-you, Ms. Dunslo - Goodbye."

Ellen hung up the phone with a sigh, and Tallia immediately began her questioning. "Ms. Dunslo? - As in Disabled Student Services at the University?"

"Yeah --"

"Something's gone wrong, hasn't it? Have they cancelled?"

"No," Ellen answered quickly. "But we have run into a bit of a problem."

"I knew it! What happened?"

Ellen took a deep breath. "The university administration has just decided that, because of funding cutbacks, they're going to have to limit the number of unclassified students that they accept next year. The deadline for applying is tomorrow."

"So can't we fill out the forms or whatever when we go over there tomorrow?" Tallia asked anxiously.

"Sure we can - but there's still a problem."

"Well, what is it?"

Ellen hesitated. "Most of the people who apply as unclassified students have already got their high school diploma--"

Tallia threw up her hands. "And because I won't have finished high school yet by next fall, I'll probably be put at the bottom of the list."

"Technically, yes - but you shouldn't give up yet."

"Why not?!"

Ellen referred to her daytimer. "Because Ms. Dunslo has rescheduled our meeting from eleven to ten and arranged for Dr. Brian Greenberg, the Associate Dean of Arts to meet with us as well."

"And this Associate Dean person is the one who decides who gets in?"

Ellen smiled. "You got it."

"Great!" muttered Tallia. "I'll probably start off the meeting by running over his foot!"

Ellen laughed as she got up, crossed round her desk, and stood in front of Tallia. "Don't worry Tallia - all you've got to do is be yourself." She turned and picked up her daytimer. "I'm going to see if Shaun can look in on Greg while we're gone tomorrow, and then I'll see about getting your pick-up changed."

Tallia smiled. "Thanks, Ellen."

On her way to the door, Ellen gave Greg a playful pat on the shoulder. "Oh, by the way, I've got the computer all set up so you guys can work on the paper."

Greg nodded. "Thanks, Ellen."

As soon as Ellen had left the room, Tallia turned to Greg. "Haven't you told Ellen about your clinic appointment?"

"No."

"Well, when are you going to tell her? Didn't you just hear her say she's getting Mr. Murphy to look in on you while we're at the university tomorrow. You won't even be here - you'll be at clinic."

"I'll get Dave to tell Mr. Murphy tomorrow, after you guys leave. I'm not telling Ellen anything until everything's over with tomorrow," Greg said firmly.

"But Ellen's gonna freak when she finds out you may be sick and you didn't tell her!"

"Better that than telling her and having her freak out *now*." Greg's expression became intensely serious. "You're not the only person who has to perform well at that interview tomorrow. Ellen's gotta be your agent; she's gotta go in there and convince those big-wigs that you really can cut it at university, quotas or no quotas. She won't be able to do that if she's freaking out about my clinic appointment."

"You know, as much as I really appreciate all this selfless nobility on your part, it might all turn out to be just wasted effort. There's no way I can pull off getting into university, not with these new quotas." She threw back her head and groaned. "I *HATE* my life!"

"It'll be okay--you've got an entire school full of people backing you up."

"Tallia!--" Andrea's voice sounded from the doorway.

Tallia turned to Greg with an ironic look. "You were saying!"

"Tallia, recess was over ten minutes ago. Why didn't you come get your pill?" demanded Andrea.

"Sorry - I didn't realize --"

"You forget about your meds and then wonder why your system gets plugged up!" Andrea threw up her hands in exasperation. "Honestly, Tallia, sometimes I really don't know what's wrong with you!"

"I *said* I was sorry."

"Alright - let's just get this pill down."

Obediently, Tallia tilted her head back and opened her mouth so that Andrea could pop the pill in and chase it down with some water. "Now, don't forget, I need to give you another one of these at nine tomorrow before class starts," Andrea said as she wiped Tallia's mouth.

Tallia hesitated. "But I don't think I'll be here at nine - I've got that university meeting tomorrow morning."

"I thought that meeting wasn't till eleven."

"Yeah, well, the meeting's been moved up to ten."

Instantly, Andrea asked. "Why? Is there some sort of problem?"

Tallia glanced at Greg and shook her head.

"No problem," Greg came in quickly. "Just a little change in plans."

"Thanks, Greg. But I might as well tell her." Tallia sighed. "She's gonna find out anyway."

"Find out what?" Andrea demanded.

Tallia took a deep breath. "They're going to limit the number of unclassified students they let into university next year, so there's a good chance I won't get in."

Andrea was comfort itself. "Well, maybe it's for the best. I mean, at least this way, you'll be saved the frustration of getting there and finding out you can't make it." She turned towards the door. "Well, I've got to go give Valarie her meds. Don't forget to check in with me before you leave tomorrow so that I can give you your pill --"

"And boost my confidence another few notches!" Tallia muttered under her breath.

Andrea turned on her heel. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Tallia said quickly. "I'll make sure I check in."

"You do that." Andrea scowled as she left the room.

"Come on Tallia--don't let the old witch get to you!" admonished Greg. "Look, Ellen said that she'd take care of getting Handi-Van rebooked, and there's not much you can do about the rest of it, so why don't we just concentrate on finally getting the paper done."

"Yeah, I guess you're right ... Let's get to work."

* * *

Greg was sitting in Ellen's classroom giving the paper a last once-over before taking it down to duplicating when Tony came in. "Morning, Greg."

"Morning, Mr. Harris."

"Have you seen Tallia yet this morning?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, maybe she's waiting for Ellen downstairs." Tony turned to leave.

Greg called him back. "Mr. Harris--"

Tony turned back. "Yes?"

"I was just wondering if you'd had a chance to write me that reference letter yet?"

Tony looked perplexed and mumbled to himself. "Reference letter? Ref..."

Greg sighed impatiently. "For that sports-writing competition. I need three reference letters. You said you'd write one."

The light dawned on Tony. "Oh, yes, that's right. I'm sorry, Greg, I haven't had a chance to get to it yet. I was going to work on it yesterday, but then Tallia needed me to look at her portfolio ..."

"Figures!" Greg mumbled to himself.

"Well, when's the deadline for sending in your entry package?" Tony inquired, eager to redeem himself.

"Next week. But I kind of wanted to send it off today, because I'm not sure if I'll be around much next week."

"Oh? Why not?" Tony asked in surprise.

"I've been having lung problems," sighed Greg. "I've got clinic today with Dr. McGovern, and I have a feeling that he might take me out of circulation for a while."

Even after eighteen years at Inglewood, Tony still had trouble finding the right words to say in this situation. "Oh, Greg--I'm really--sorry--to hear that..."

Greg sighed. "Yeah, well, that's the way it goes ..."

The awkward pause that followed was broken by the sound of a female voice coming over the P.A. system. "Mr. Tony Harris, please return to your office. Mr. Tony Harris, please return to your office."

"Look, I've got to go," Tony said hurriedly. "If you see Tallia, will you please tell her that I'll be in my office."

"Sure."

"Thanks."

Greg shook his head as he watched Tony disappear into the hallway, leaving him alone to vent his frustration. "And good luck with clinic, Greg - I hope things aren't as bad as they seem ... Shit! It's like I'm *gone* already!" He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and turned away from the door. "Okay, Watson, cut the dramatics - they don't help anybody ... You can't really *blame* him, can you? - Tallia *is* the one with the future - If you were in his place, you'd be doing the *exact same thing!*" He shook his head. "Man, I wish I could hate her.--" Greg was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't hear Tallia drive up to the door. "--It would make everything so much easier."

It was not until Tallia spoke that Greg realized she was there. "Talking to yourself is the first sign of senility, you know."

"Actually, the first sign of senility is listening to other people talk to themselves!" This snappy comeback was followed by an awkward pause. "So how much of my senile ravings did you catch?"

"Only the last little bit - something about something making everything so much easier."

"Um, yeah, ... Velcro! - Yeah, I'm going to get Mom to replace the buttons on my jacket with Velcro so that I can undo it myself instead of always cooking to death in the car."

Tallia wrinkled her forehead in confusion. "Oh ... Hey, what are you doing here anyway? - I thought you were going to clinic straight from home."

"Dad had to go into the office really early this morning so he dropped me off here. He'll be back in about an hour to take me to clinic."

"How're you feeling today?" Tallia asked anxiously.

Greg shrugged. "Not bad - a little tired."

"Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"I slept okay - I just woke up really early this morning."

Tallia cringed becaue she understood the implications of Greg's comment. "Coughing?"

"Y-yeah, a little."

"Shit!"

"It's no big deal - *really*," insisted Greg. He briskly changed the subject. "So, how's the soon-to-be co-ed?"

Tallia smirked. "Always the optimist, aren't ya!"

"I have my moments!--So how're you doin'?"

Tallia shrugged. "Okay, I guess ... After all the build-up, it's kind of hard to believe that this is really *it*."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Greg said quietly, gazing out the window at the familiar landscape of the school grounds. Quickly rousing himself, he turned back to Tallia. "But you've got *nothing* to worry about - you're going to knock 'em dead!"

Tallia laughed. "Maybe--if I spaz out and lose control of my chair!"

"Well, that would be *one way* to make a *lasting impression!*"

"Har, har, very funny!"

Unfortunately their laughter was interrupted by Andrea's entrance. "There you are, Tallia."

Tallia sighed. "Yup, here I am."

"Why haven't you come to get your pill yet?" demanded Andrea.

"I just got here. Can't you give it to me now?"

"I don't have them with me *now*," Andrea replied curtly. "You'll have to meet me in the bathroom in fifteen minutes."

"But I've got to meet Ellen downstairs in twenty-five minutes. --"

Andrea rolled her eyes. "Really, Tallia, it's not going to take me *ten minutes* to give you *one pill*!--There's no need for you to make such a production out of it."

"It's just that once I drive into the bathroom, I can't get out by myself--the door's too heavy."

Andrea put her hands on her hips. "Well, maybe if you had come to my mobility training classes, instead of staying cooped up here writing during spare period all the time, you would have found a way to handle that bathroom door by now."

"Yeah, and maybe I'd have learned to *walk* by now too!" muttered Tallia. taking care not to enunciate too clearly.

"What was that?" Andrea demanded in a threatening tone.

"Nothing," Tallia responded quickly. "Look, could you *please* just make sure you're there in exactly ten minutes?"

"I said I would be, didn't I?" snarled Andrea. "By the way, you *are* going to be back from this little *excursion* of yours by eleven-thirty so that I can toilet you on schedule, aren't you?"

Tallia hesitated. "I - I'm not sure."

"Not sure!" Andrea snapped.

"*Wonderful*! What about *my* schedule?! What about the *other girls?!* You're not the *only person* in this school you know!"

"Look, I *might* be back by eleven-thirty, but if I'm not, *couldn't* you do me at one, right after Valarie - just this *once*?"

"Tallia, you know very well that I go for lunch at one. When am I supposed to eat?"

Greg didn't know about Tallia, but he had had enough of Andrea's Big Nurse routine. "This is *ridiculous!* Dave takes *us* to the bathroom anytime we need to go--even if it's in the middle of class!"

"David spoils you boys!" Andrea took a deep breath and turned to Tallia with an air of resigned benevolence. "All right, here's what I'll do, I'm usually finished Valarie's dialysis at ten to one. If you're in the bathroom right when I'm finished with her, I'll do you then. If not, I'm afraid you'll just be out of luck."

"Okay--thanks." Tallia's forced the words out grudgingly.

"Just make sure you're there. And I'll be expecting you in exactly ten minutes," Andrea said sternly as she left the room.

Tallia heaved a great sigh as she turned from the doorway back to Greg. "Oh, isn't this *wonderful!* I now *owe Andrea!* A fact of which I'm sure to be reminded for *centuries* to come! Yup - this definitely *bodes well* for the rest of the day!"

"Since when do you believe in omens?"

"Since Andrea was the first person to walk through that door instead of Tony or Ellen." Tallia sulked.

"Tony *was* here - just before you came in. He said you could catch up with him at his office."

Tallia steadied her left arm with her right hand so that she could look at her watch. "Hmm ... I've got a few minutes before I'm supposed to meet Attila ..."

"So what are you waiting for? Go see him."

"But what about you?"

Greg shrugged. "What about me?"

"I don't want to just take off and leave you staring at the walls."

"It's okay - I've got my old senile self to talk to."

Tallia hesitated. "But we haven't even really talked about--today."

"You're going to the university, I'm going to clinic. What's there to talk about?"

"But I can't help worrying."

"Like I told you already, you'll be fine."

"I worry about *you*."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you don't have time for that. You know that Tony will be really disappointed if he doesn't get in that one last pep-talk. So go see him already."

"Okay, I guess you're right," sighed Tallia. Before heading for the door, she turned to Greg and patted his arm. "Good luck today, eh."

"Thanks," Greg said softly. "You too."

* * *

Greg sat alone in Ellen's classroom working feverishly at the computer. His limp hands moved slowly. Just placing them on the keyboard seemed to require a Herculean effort. Still, he plodded on doggedly.

Just as he typed the last period, Tony came in. "Hi, Greg. Hard at work I see."

"Yup, never know when the *Vice-Principal's* going to drop in and check up on you."

"A very wise move! But, to be honest, it wasn't just *you* that I was hoping to check up on."

"Let me guess. You were getting a little anxious to find out how Tallia made out at her interview, so you came up here to see if she and Ellen are back yet."

Tony looked a little self-conscious. "Either you're very observant, or I'm very transparent."

"It's probably a bit of both," quipped Greg.

"So has there been any sign of Tallia and Ellen yet?"

"Not since I got back from clinic half an hour ago." There was a subconscious emphasis on the word *clinic*. "They should be back soon though. I know that Tallia booked her pick-up with Handi-Van for eleven-fifteen."

"Well, then, maybe I'll hang around here for a while--if it's okay with you."

Greg shrugged. "Sure."

Tony perched on the edge of a desk next to Greg. There was a slight pause.

"So do you think Tallia made out okay?"

"Oh, yeah - quotas or no quotas, I don't see why they wouldn't accept her as an unclassified student next year." Tony sighed. "Greg, about this morning, I'm sorry if I came off sounding insensitive. I've been working on the reference letter for you. I'll have it ready by the end of the day."

"Thanks."

Another awkward pause.

Tony hesitated. "I hear things didn't go so well for you at clinic this morning--I ran into your dad on his way out after he'd dropped you off. I'm really sorry that we're going to be without half of our crack journalistic team for a while."

"Maybe the rest of the year - it's the end of April already." Greg sighed. "Dr. McGovern wanted to admit me this afternoon, but I managed to put him off so that I could get my files organized. Then it'll be easier for Tallia to take over the whole paper."

"Are you okay?"

"Apparently not, according to Dr. McGovern."

Yet another awkward pause while Tony racked his brain for a way to convince Greg that his concern was genuine. "I know that Tallia's really going to miss you working with her."

"Yeah, but I'm sure she'll do fine on her own." The resentment with which the words came out startled Greg. Instantly, he felt compelled to make it up to Tallia. "Mr. Harris, I know it's not like we've ever been real *buddies* or anything like that - but I know how tight you and Tallia are ... So--so I was wondering if you'd do me a favour."

"Sure, if I can. What is it?"

Greg sighed. "Look, I think you know as well as I do that this lung infection thing could wind up getting me more than an extended summer holiday. Most guys with MD who go into hospital with *`little`* lung infections wind up with pneumonia, and soon you guys are stuck planning a memorial. Now, I'm not just going to roll over and let this all happen already--I'm going to fight this thing with everything I've got. But I also know that this could well be it, and if it is, that's okay--I've been spending plenty of time with my minister lately preparing myself."

"How can I help?" Tony asked quietly.

"It's Tallia. In her head, she knows what's coming, but somehow she hasn't really accepted it yet."

"She probably thinks that as long as she doesn't accept it, nothing will happen."

Greg nodded. "Exactly. But, now that I'm going into hospital, she's gonna have to start to accept it. And when it finally happens--she's really gonna need someone to lean on. I just wanna make sure she has that, even if she's not at Inglewood anymore."

"I fully intend to stay part of Tallia's life in any way I can, Greg." Tony leaned over and put his hand on Greg's shoulder. "I'll always be there for her--I promise."

"I think it would really help Tallia deal with everything that's going on right now if you let her know that."

Tony nodded. "Then I will."

"Thanks--I don't think I'll have to worry so much about her now."

"See, Tallia, I *told* you that you'd have a welcoming committee waiting for you." Ellen spoke as they approached the classroom.

"More like a pacing committee from the look of these two!" Tallia laughed as she turned to address Tony. "What, Mr. Supreme Confidence - did you get so antsy that you wore a hole in your office floor and had to come pace in here?"

"Not at all! I just wanted to be the first to be regaled with the tales of your triumph!" Tony shot back.

"Yeah, right!"

"So enough with the small-talk already - start *regaling*!" commanded Tony.

"Yeah, how did it go?" Greg chimed in.

Tallia took a deep breath. "Well, we met with this Disabled Student Services person and the Associate Dean of Arts. At first, neither of 'em were too sure if I'd be able to get in next year. But they looked at my transcripts and my list of extracurricular activities, and then we started talking about me taking an English course next year. I figured English would be a good place to start since it'll be my major - if I last that long!"

Ellen gave her a disapproving rap on the shoulder. "Tallia!"

"Okay, okay, I take that back. Anyway, it seems that they have a pretty good set up for us crips over there. They have student volunteers who help with taking notes in class and getting around on campus."

"Sounds great!" Greg grinned. "So you're in then?

Tallia answered in a small, amazed voice. "Yeah, I'm registered to start English 101 in September!"

"That is *so* wonderful!" Tony exclaimed rushing forward to embrace Tallia. "I'm so proud of you!"

Greg smiled and shook his head. "Everybody's gonna freak when they hear!"

"Wait, you guys haven't even heard the best part yet!" Ellen interjected.

Tony grew wide-eyed. "What? You mean, there's *more!*"

Tallia raised her eyebrows. "I don't know, Ellen. Judging from how floored *you* were, it might *kill* Tony!"

"You've got a point there, Tallia." Ellen laughed as she pulled up a chair. "Tony, you'd better sit down."

Tony did not do as he was told. "What *is* it?"

Ellen placed her hand on Tallia's shoulder and began her narration. "After our meeting at Disabled Student Services, we went over to the university newspaper office and chatted with the editor. She was *really* impressed with Tallia's articles from the *Insider*!--"

"Well, of course she was!" Tony said.

Ellen shook her head. "No, Tony, you don't understand. The woman offered Tallia *a job* as a feature writer!"

For once, Tony and Greg were on the same wavelength. "*She what?!*" Tony and Greg exclaimed in unison.

"But you won't even be a full-time student yet," said Greg.

Tallia nodded. "That's exactly what *I* said. But she said my stuff was already of the same calibre as stuff by their fourth-year staff writers. She also said that I could limit my submissions to just one or two articles a month so that I won't get too overloaded."

Tony could barely contain himself. "What did I tell you! Look out Fotheringham, here comes Taves!"

"From the *Inglewood Insider* to a university newspaper - now there's an *historic leap!*" declared Greg.

Ellen smiled. "You got that right!"

"This calls for celebration!" announced Tony. "Hey, Tallia, what do you say I take you out for a mentor-protegée lunch. We can walk over to that Italian place down the street."

"Oh, Tony, I'd love that! ... But Andrea will have a fit if I don't show up for lunch - not to mention the cow she'd have if I'm not back in time for her to take me to the bathroom at ten to one - and there's no way that we'd be back in time!"

"Ah, Andrea can stuff it!" muttered Tony.

Ellen was shocked. "Mr. Harris!"

"Well, she gets paid to be a nurse for eight hours a day. I don't see why a little shift in the order of her duties should be such a problem. In fact, I think it's high time I had a chat with the Head Nurse about Andrea's unacceptable attitude."

Ellen thought a minute. "I couldn't agree more."

Tallia felt like she was having the best dream ever, and it was just about to get better.

"So, what do you say, Tallia? Let me take you out for lunch - it can be the start of a brand-new tradition."

Tallia was puzzled. "Tradition?"

"Yeah, the first of many celebratory lunches commemorating the first of many successes in a very long university career. From the first time you make the Dean's List to your Post Doctoral Fellowship!"

And, with those few words, months, even years, of anxiety over the future of her friendship with Tony was put to rest. Suddenly overwhelmed, Tallia spoke in a quiet voice. "You--You plan to be around for--*all that?*"

Tony smiled at her affectionately as he took her hand. "All that, and *more*."

Greg closed his eyes and sighed with satisfaction.

"So how about if I head back to my office now and straighten up a few things and come back to pick you up in about fifteen minutes?'

"Okay."

"I'll walk down with you, Tony--I've got to go check my mailbox." said Ellen.

"Ellen, when you get back, do you want to grab a milkshake or something in the cafeteria to celebrate the successful start of your career as an agent?"

"Sure, Greg, I'd like that very much." Ellen smiled. "See you guys later."

"And *please* take it easy with the town-crier routine, you guys," Tallia requested earnestly.

"We'll *try*!" they called back as they left.

Tallia threw her head back and sighed in an exhausted way before she turned to face Greg.

He nodded understandingly. "Yeah, these major life-changing mornings sure take a lot out of a person, don't they!"

Tallia straightened abruptly. "Your clinic appointment! Oh, man, I *can't believe* I didn't think to ask you about it *before now!* I'm *such scum!*"

"You *are not!*" insisted Greg. "You were just a *tad* preoccupied with trying to arrange the rest of your life!

"Yeah, yeah - enough about *my* life. What happened at clinic? What did Dr. McGovern say?"

Greg hesitated. "Well--he said that I could use a break from this madhouse for a while. So I just came in to tie up a few loose ends get my *Insider* files organized so you'll look good when you go solo."

"And *where* do you think *you're* going?"

Greg's voice was weak but steady. "Well, as of tomorrow morning, General Hospital."

"What for?" Tallia asked with growing dread.

"Tests."

"Why?" she demanded, almost angrily.

"Well, McGovern said ... that there's a possibility of--"

Tallia shook her head in desperate disbelief. "Not a lung infection."

"Maybe ... Actually, it's quite likely."

"That's how it started with Alex and Zachary," Tallia said quietly.

"I know."

Defiance welled up in Tallia. This *couldn't* be happening! Not *again*! Not *now*! Why did every gain she made have to be followed by an even greater loss?

Close to tears, Tallia turned away. "But they're not sure yet?"

"McGovern said he was ninety percent sure."

"That still leaves ten percent ..."

"Tallia--"

She angrily turned back to Greg. "What? Are you telling me that you're just going to give up on your own life?! *Are you?*"

"No. But I've got to face *reality*--we *both* do."

Tallia threw up her hands in despair. "*Reality?* Much more of the kind of reality I've had to deal with in this place, and I'm gonna go *schizophrenic!*"

"Look, Tallia, I know it's hard.--"

Not seeming to have heard Greg, Tallia went on. "Do you remember when we first started junior high? Our greatest ambition in life was to get on the school paper and show all those seniors how to write. And we knew we could do it too, because we were part of the Fearless Five! Well, look at us now! - We *are* the *Insider*! When we--leave--the paper will cease to exist. But what about the Fearless Five, eh? What happened to them? Well, Alex and Zachary, they had

MD, so they had a spot reserved on the obits page all along. But hey, writing tributes for dead friends is just part of the job when you work on *our* school paper. That's just the *reality* of Inglewood, right? Then, there was Jo-Anne. See, Jo-Anne just couldn't deal with that kind of *reality*. So she ran away into the `*real world*` to try to become `*normal.*` Unfortunately, the `*real world*` seems to have just chewed her up and spat her out. Then, there's me. *I'm* good in school, *I* can *write!* - So *I'm* supposed to go out into the big, bad, *real world* and start beating staircases into ramps, so that more of those disabled people who come after me can make it out there ... *I* have the responsibility of being *trail-blazer!* ... But *you* - see, even though you have the exact same skills and talents that I do, *you* don't have to help carry that responsibility! *You* can even just totally abandon me to do it all on my own!"

Tallia's words seemed to unlock the pent-up feelings of bitterness and resentment that Greg had been trying so hard to suppress. "Don't you think I *envy* you your shot at making it out there?" he burst out in anger. "Don't you think I *envy* you your *life*?"

Angry tears welled up in Tallia's eyes. "Of course, I do!--Do you have any idea how *unbearably guilty* it made me feel going to the university this morning when I knew that you were on your way to clinic?"

As quickly as it had come, Greg's anger subsided. "Look, the envy, the guilt--they don't really count."

"Why not?"

"Because they don't change the fact that *you* have a great chance to make it out there. And losing *your* chance won't get *me* one."

"But *you deserve* that chance as much as I do."

Greg's expression became very intense. "So *you're* just gonna have to make *your* chance count for *both* of us--for *all* of us!"

Tallia shook her head. "Oh, no you *don't!* --You're *not* going to do this to me! This isn't one of those sappy scenes on Little House on the Prairie when the dying friend makes the hero promise to live out his dream for him! ... I *can't* take on that kind of pressure! ... I *can't* live *your* life."

"I don't want you to live *my* life. I just want to make sure you don't let whatever happens to *me* keep you from living *your* life."

Tallia bit her lip. "But what if I get out there and end up falling on my face?"

"That doesn't seem too likely at this point!"

"But what if it happens?"

"Then you'll pick yourself up and go on."

"I don't think I can do it alone."

"You won't *be* alone. You'll be surrounded by a whole new circle of friends before you know it. You'll still have Tony. And, who knows, you might even have Jo-Anne."

"I was thinking about it coming back here on the bus," Tallia said slowly. "I'm going to call her tonight. I won't mention any of this university stuff, I'll just tell her I'm here if she needs me."

"And I bet she'll come around. See, you won't be alone."

"But-- I don't want to--lose *you* either."

"I'll still be around - in spirit, if not in body."

"My guardian angel, eh," Tallia said quietly.

Greg smiled. "Not quite. But maybe I'll get to help direct 'em."

With one last wave of defiance, Tallia turned away. "No--this is *NUTS!* We're sitting here talking like this is *IT* already."

"It is--at least it's time to get ready."

Tallia began to sob. "No - not yet - it's *too soon*!"

Greg rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it! ... Look, Tallia, we've both known that this was coming since Adam died in grade six. I looked at him in that coffin, and I realized that I was gonna be the body in the coffin in a few years. I'd been so mad at Adam for dying without giving me a chance to say goodbye - I promised myself then that I wouldn't do that to *my* friends ... That's the one thing I can't stand about this place--everyone can see what's coming, but no one's got the guts to say it out loud." He looked directly at her. "Tallia, I'm going to die soon."

Tallia's was trying hard to keep her chin from quivering.

Greg spoke softly. "But that's okay, 'cause this friendship thing we've got goin'--nothing can screw it up - not gravity, or death."

Tallia paused thoughtfully. "When Adam died, Mrs. Williams told us that friends who really care about each other become part of each other's souls forever."

"Mrs. Williams always was pretty much on the ball."

In spite of herself, Tallia laughed. Greg sure knew how to kill a *moment*! "Get outta here! You couldn't *stand* her! - You used to call her Wicked Witch Williams!"

"Details, details!"

She reached over and put her hand on his arm. "You're *really* okay with this?"

Greg shrugged. "I guess so. I mean, it *does* have its up-side."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing, I'll finally have this gravity thing beat!"

A trace of a smile crept across Tallia's face. "Yeah, I guess you will at that."

Tony appeared in the classroom doorway. "Ready to head out, Kiddo?"

Greg looked at Tallia. "I think she's all set."

Tallia took a deep breath. "Yeah. I guess I finally am."